

Reborn On Mars III – Empress of the Night

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The Lapis Lazuli Dome

*Lo, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem,
Not knowing the things that shall befall me there.
– Acts 20:22*

"Has somebody disappeared again, Ryustem?" asked Agamemnon, Count of Mycenae, faster than the first mate entering the bridge could open his mouth.

They were already close to the Imperial capital. Beyond the UV-resistant glass, the ocean had seemingly become very calm. Turning his gaze from the dreary scenery, Agamemnon shook the Aqua Vitae bubbling in his glass.

"Who's missing this time?" Agamemnon inquired.

"Two people: Hussein and Sarkis, Captain," First Mate Ryustem bin Shadaad, looking rather peaked, answered. Ryustem's common Imperial speech with its heavy Cretan dialect sounded respectful, yet faintly shrill.

The middle-aged Terran had joined the Imperial Navy as Agamemnon's crewman thirty years ago. Accompanying his master, who was appointed the captain of a warship, Ryustem was a great veteran who'd traveled the whole of the Imperial territory—from Carthage in the west to the Black Area of the Black Sea Coast to the east—as if it were familiar as his own garden. Even among the forty crewmembers assigned to the ship *Nereides*, the first mate's courage stood out. He was the right-hand man in whom Agamemnon placed all his trust. But now, Ryustem's sunburned, deeply lined face appeared fearful, as if a night fog had enveloped it.

"This makes six people. All of the crew are afraid," said Ryustem.

"Didn't they fall off the deck? You humans move clumsily. Maybe that's what happened," Agamemnon retorted.

"No, that's impossible. They were all experienced at sea. And all of them disappeared from their rooms when they were off duty. Those on duty reported that they didn't see anything," explained Ryustem.

"So they disappeared inside the ship?" grumbled Agamemnon, chewing his lip with his long fangs.

Nereides, which Her Majesty the Empress had entrusted to Agamemnon, was classified as a deep-sea assault ship, a warship in the Imperial Navy. Although its weaponry level wasn't very high, it was a small vessel that moved through the depth of the ocean at high speed to conduct patrol, enforcement, and reconnaissance. Its interior space wasn't large, even for a warship.

"Well, what about the possibility that the crew are hiding somewhere? Have you searched places other than the living quarters?" asked Agamemnon.

"We've searched everywhere that can be searched, except for one place . . ." Ryustem trailed off.

"One place?" Agamemnon asked.

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"The ship's stores, Captain," Ryustem replied in a low voice as he turned guiltily toward his master. "We still haven't investigated the ship's stores."

"The ship's stores?" repeated Agamemnon in disbelief. "But that place has been completely sealed since this ship departed Crete's capital, Heraklion. Do you think somebody could get in or out?"

"I don't know. However, when Hairedin disappeared, someone said he heard a scream in there. And footsteps. But the strangest thing was . . ." The first mate's hand unconsciously fingered the amulet hanging on his chest. His voice shook as if he were about to confess something taboo. . . there was blood in the corridor outside the storeroom. It was in the shape of shoes so huge that no one could believe what they were seeing. Captain, there must be something in that room!"

"Hmmm," mumbled Agamemnon while slowly closing his eyes and feeling his neatly shaven beard.

Generally speaking, the notion of fear had little to do with Imperial nobility. Methuselahs, the strongest battle creatures on land, didn't fear much, being raised since infancy to be thoroughly proud. They did have some knowledge of the emotion, however — especially when it came to Imperial law. Disobeying even one rule decided by the only master in the Empire was a crime that every Imperial noble feared committing. Agamemnon had strict orders to completely seal the ship's stores until the crew arrived at the Imperial capital. A certain person's baggage was inside, packed on the ship since Crete.

"Ion Fortuna, Count of Memphis? It seems we've let an extremely dangerous passenger aboard," Agamemnon proclaimed. Folding his hands under his chin, the Count of Mycenae regarded the battle flag on the wall, which featured the "Duosater," or overlapping moons. The sight of the glorious Empire's national symbol provoked an extended sigh.

The Empire was a meritocracy; however, a certain amount of family influence couldn't be ignored. Especially when one considered the Count of Memphis, whose grandmother was the Chief Privy Counselor, Mirka Fortuna, Duchess of Moldova. He also happened to be a member of a famous family among famous families. Ten members were high officials who had a government rank higher than three.

The Count was young, yet he'd been appointed Chief Imperial Sword Bearer, and had been promised a future post in the State Secrets Institution. He was no doubt returning from some secret mission he'd been entrusted with on this occasion. Upon returning to the Imperial capital, he would probably be promoted again based on his distinguished services.

Although the Count was the same species of Methuselah, his speed of advancement varied greatly from a person in the field like Agamemnon. If possible, Agamemnon wanted to avoid incurring such a person's displeasure. Even so, he could no longer turn a blind eye to the loss of his subordinates. He was the only Methuselah assigned to the *Nereiades*, and he was responsible for the lives of its forty crewmembers. And, unlike the barbaric "Outers" in the Empire, Methuselaha had to obey those of higher social status.

"I'll remove the seals on the storeroom pending a captain's meeting, and then I'll confirm the Imperial envoy's baggage," said Agamemnon.

The most precious blood flows first. Those words, drilled into him down to his bone marrow as an Imperial noble, made Agamemnon decide.

"Ryustem, summon the navigator and chief sailor. Have them attend, in accordance with regulations," Agamemnon ordered.

"Is it really all right, Captain?" Ryustem asked hesitantly. His brow slightly furrowed, the first mate gauged his master's expression. Although he was a citizen, Ryustem wasn't an

Imperial citizen; he was Agamemnon's private citizen. Unlike an Imperial citizen, who was actually an Imperial government worker, a private citizen could choose to contract with an individual nobleman. His master's fate was his own fate.

Ryustem stared intently at Agamemnon. "Count of Memphis requisitioned the *Nereides* on the authority of an Imperial decree. His orders have the same effect as Her Majesty's words, limited to the time of his execution of the Imperial decree. If you mishandle his luggage without permission, won't you be tried for treason, Dow?" Ryustem asked.

"The current time is fifteen hundred hours. If the Count is a normal Methuselah, it should be time for him to retire soon. To get permission for that, Count of Memphis and his citizen ... Let's see, what was he called?" Agamemnon struggled to remember.

"It's Nightroad. Abel Nightroad," Ryustem responded.

"Yes, hasn't that Nightroad holed himself up in his room and not shown himself since coming aboard? I'll think of a good excuse. Don't worry," Agamemnon insisted.

As he removed the key to the storeroom out of the safe, Agamemnon broke into a dauntless smile. No matter what anybody said, the *Nereides* was *his* ship, and he was her captain.

"By the way, Ryustem, how much longer until we reach the Imperial capital?" asked Agamemnon.

"We spotted the Lapis Lazuli Wall a little while ago, so maybe in another hour," Ryustem replied.

Regardless of the estimated time of arrival, it seemed as though time was short. If Count of Memphis's baggage ended up being dangerous, Agamemnon couldn't let it into the beautiful capital.

"I'm going down to the storeroom," Agamemnon announced. "Ryustem, summon Ibrahim and Socorul as soon as possible."

"The navigator and chief sailor should already be waiting in front of the storeroom," Ryustem said confidently.

"Well done," Agamemnon replied. Grinning, he raised the glass containing the remaining Aqua Vitae. After gulping it down, inhaling its faint scent of iron, he left the captain's room behind with a swagger, calling back, "Good, then come with me, first mate!"

The atmosphere in the storeroom was gloomy, its air stagnant. The light from the lanterns the crew held aloft shone like will-o'-the-wisps against the low ceiling.

"There doesn't seem to be anything amiss, Captain," Ibrahim declared apprehensively. Thin as a scarecrow, the navigator — not the bravest of the crew — cast his fear-filled eyes to and fro amid the deep-rooted darkness.

"The baggage locks haven't been opened. They look the same as when we left port," Socorul said as he returned abruptly from inside. With a set of pincers as big as a log in one hand, the large-framed chief sailor announced in a deep voice, "There's nothing like footprints. Do you want me to look more closely?"

"After all, the bunch who disappeared didn't come in here, did they, Captain?" Ryustem asked. He heaved a sigh of both relief and despair pondering the chief sailor's report. "I thought it must be a stowaway, but when I really think about it, a person couldn't possibly get into this baggage."

With his eyes, the first mate pointed out the forty-plus wooden boxes neatly aligned. It would've been impossible to peek inside any of the strictly guarded three-foot cubes without opening its lid. The thick boards were reinforced with iron bindings, so they couldn't be opened easily.

"Captain, it seems to have been a wrong guess. Let's beat it at once. If we leave now, we can finish without being noticed by the Imperial envoy's people," Ibrahim suggested.

Agamemnon didn't answer Ibrahim's plea, which made the navigator want to cry.

Agamemnon's eyes, shining blue-white in the darkness, fell to one corner of the floor. More accurately, the Methuselah glared as if his eyes were boring into the faint shrimp-tan stain left on the wooden planks.

"What's wrong, Captain?" Ryustem inquired.

"It's a bloodstain," Agamemnon answered, gasping softly.

What caught Agamemnon's sense of smell was something that rivaled that of a great white shark — the stale stench of settled sediment and the scent of salt, mixed with the smell of rust. It wasn't merely any rusty smell, either. It was the most familiar smell to a Methuselah, and the most detestable stench. It was the smell of blood.

"C-captain, what?" Ryustem shouted, completely flustered.

Before Ryustem could utter anything else, Agamemnon put his hand to the floor. He exhibited an uncanny ease of strength as he inserted his talons, extended like a cat's, into the seam in the floor. The floorboards were firmly nailed down, but they were as flimsy as paper after the Methuselah was finished with them. With a puny creak, they flipped up with ease.

The three Terrans gasped in unison, but it wasn't witnessing their superior officer's superhuman power that awed them. The *things* that appeared beneath the light of the lanterns... They were six corpses. All of them had completely mummified and resembled misshapen specimens with dried skin stuck on.

"Orhan, Nedim, Guzino, Hairedin, Sarkis, Hussein . . . How . . . how awful!" Ryustem exclaimed.

"Ryustem, summon all hands to an emergency meeting," Agamemnon instructed. Addressing the sailors, who were all covering their faces in horror, Agamemnon continued, "Ibrahim, open this baggage and inspect its contents. After that, Socorul, you arm five or six people and come with me."

"Wh- where are we going, Captain?" Ryustem muttered as his superior officer turned his back on the first mate.

Slaves obeyed citizens, and citizens were subjects of the nobility. Thus, nobles protected citizens, and citizens protected slaves. That was the law of the great Empire, the nobility's pride. Having witnessed citizens cruelly transformed, Agamemnon's face turned pale with anger and humiliation.

"I'll see Count of Memphis. I'll make him explain what this means!" Agamemnon shouted.

"But we don't know if there's any connection between these corpses and Count of Memphis," Ryustem replied.

"Look at this!" Agamemnon roared, pointing at the freshest corpse. Two open holes, like moles, were visible in its neck. But they weren't moles. They were —

"The mark of the vampire?" Ryustem cried.

"Except for me, Count of Memphis is the only Methuselah on this ship," Agamemnon growled. Abandoning his usual calm demeanor, the angry Methuselah howled, sharp fangs protruding from his lips. "I'll see that man at once! I'll see him and get him to explain what this means!"

"What will you get him to explain, Captain?" asked a man in a calm voice, almost a whisper. "What's the matter? You look so different. Are you in a hurry about something?"

"You, Abel Nightroad?" Agamemnon said aghast. *When in the world . . . ?*

A white face, almost transparent, greeted Agamemnon when he turned around suddenly. The countenance was beautiful enough for the seamen to be involuntarily bewitched; it was god-like, frozen in a frame of artifice and wearing a beguiling smile. But the instant the onlookers regarded that smile, a vision of the image of a carnivorous plant luring its prey with a sweet perfume crossed everyone's mind. Even more startling was that a Terran could approach without the Methuselah Agamemnon noticing.

"Nightroad, w-when in the world did you arrive?" asked Agamemnon.

"Let's see, about when you said, 'I'll see Count of Memphis,'" the priest answered.

Smiling as he pushed aside his long bangs, the young man sauntered into the storeroom at a relaxed pace. The black clothing that indicated he was of citizen rank fluttered ominously.

"You mustn't, Captain. I'm sure an order was given to seal this storeroom until we arrived at the Imperial capital. The order of an Imperial envoy is the same as Her Majesty's order. I have no idea what's going to come of this," warned the man.

"That's my line, Terran," Agamemnon retorted.

Stepping forward to shield the citizens who unconsciously flinched back, Agamemnon glared at the beautiful but insolent Terran. Indignation gushed forth like an aura from the body of the Methuselah, the strongest creature on Earth.

"I arrest your master, Count of Memphis, on my authority as captain. The charges are the murders of six citizens!" declared Agamemnon.

"Murder? That's a misunderstanding," said the Terran. In contrast to the infuriated Agamemnon, the young man's expression didn't change in the slightest. His carefree and languid face verged on emotionless. "He isn't killing your subordinates. He's only one person!"

"Hmph! Are you trying to protect your master, Nightroad?" asked Agamemnon, his eyes narrowing hatefully. "Those bite marks are full proof. Far from simply killing the citizens, he drank their living blood. How barbaric!"

"I'm telling you, you're mistaken," the priest contended. "It wasn't Count of Memphis who drank your subordinates' blood." His timing seemed as though it had been carefully planned.

At the same time Agamemnon noticed the strange sound of splitting wood from behind, a high-pitched scream of agony roared.

"I-Ibrahim?" yelled Agamemnon.

A bizarre spectacle played out before the Methuselah's eyes when he turned around. Ibrahim's scrawny body was caught on a wooden box. Actually, he was being gripped by an arm thrusting outward from the box. The thick appendage coiled around the throat of the screaming Terran like a serpent winding up its prey.

"Captain, h-help!" pleaded Ibrahim. "Hel — "

The feeble navigator's screams ceased when, suddenly, his neck snapped with a nauseating sound. The huge arm severed not only his neck bones but also the sinews surrounding them. Ibrahim's head, unable to bear its own weight, fell to the floor trailing nerves and veins.

"What *are* these?" asked Agamemnon.

It wasn't the poor citizen's corpse that caught Agamemnon's eye, however. All of the wooden boxes in the storeroom were slowly but simultaneously beginning to expand. The noise of boards splitting echoed one after the other, black shadows creeping out from their gaps.

The dark figures had strangely warped silhouettes. The men wore Outer-style black military overcoats. Agamemnon couldn't see their faces because of the helmets and gas masks that veiled them, but they were all extraordinarily large men. He couldn't figure out how such giants had hidden in those boxes.

The sickening, tacky sound of previously dislocated joints re-connecting reverberated. As soon as silence resumed, the ominous black shadows were all standing up.

"What are these?" Agamemnon moaned.

"They're Jaegers, Captain," answered the man in a pleasant tone, his face still beaming with a smile. "More specifically, they're called Auto Jaegers. They're my cute toys, made by processing you Methuselahs' corpses."

"Captain, p-please escape!" Ryustem insisted.

Prepared to die trying to save their beloved captain, Ryustem and Socorul stood tall in effort to block the towering men. They gallantly swung down crowbars toward the heads of the mysterious masses.

The Jaegers thwarted their attackers' advances with ease. Grasping the crowbars with their thick palms, they reeled in the citizens with unbelievable strength and gently embraced them, as if lovers. Before the eyes of the desperately struggling men, the Jaegers pulled up their gas masks to reveal stark white faces, like those of the dead. Some kind of exposed machinery jutted from their bald heads, and their grotesque faces revealed eyes sewn shut with thick thread. Their thick lips appeared as though they'd been slashed with a knife; and when they opened them, dagger-like sparks shot out.

"Ryustem! Socorul!" Agamemnon bellowed. But Agamemnon's screams were interrupted by the continuous echo of crunching joints. Suddenly, Agamemnon regained composure and directed his anger toward the visitor. "Damn you! I won't forgive you, Nightroad!"

"Silly you. I'm not your opponent, Captain," said the man.

Agamemnon's eyes, burning with anger, were so horrifying that any weak-hearted person would faint just from the sight of them. Regardless, his young counterpart's expression didn't waver. With a grin, he jutted his chin in the direction behind the raging Methuselah.

"A lowly Terran such as I is unworthy to be the opponent of an Imperial nobleman. After all, a *boyar* has to have a *boyar* for an opponent. Right, Count of Memphis?" the man asked.

"What?" replied Agamemnon.

As Agamemnon turned around, a blue-white light flickered in his field of view. By the time he realized it was a ball of fire floating in the palm of a human figure that had sneaked up behind him, an arm extended like a poisonous serpent and wound around the brave Imperial nobleman's throat.

The stench of roasting flesh filled the atmosphere. Agamemnon struggled to break free from the burning hand, but the strength of the young Methuselah who stood before him — Ion Fortuna, Count of Memphis — was far superior to his. Agamemnon's body, still hoisted in the air, flailed in vain.

"You! Who in the world are you?" Agamemnon asked. Amid the vile odor of burning protein, he summoned the last of his strength and spat out a pained cry. "You . . . are not Imperial nobles. . . ."

"We? We are Ion Fortuna, Count of Memphis, and his citizen, Abel Nightroad. Didn't you say so a little while ago?" asked the young Methuselah.

The Count of Memphis snickered as he dexterously snapped his fingers, when, all of a sudden, a blue-white flash burst forth from his palm. The flames blazed high with explosive energy, and were the last light Agamemnon saw in this world.

"Now, then, won't you deal with the other crew members, too, Count of Memphis?" the man inquired. Swiftly kicking away the lump of charcoal, which turned into a puff of white smoke as it rolled away, "Abel Nightroad" turned to his companion. "Take the Jaegers and finish them off at once, because I'm going up on deck. The truth is, this is the first time I've been to the Empire. I've waited a long time, so I want to gaze at it from afar."

Before the "Count of Memphis" could nod silently, the young man had turned confidently on his heel, humming optimistically as he ventured toward the deck.

Beneath the clear blue sky, the sea flashed a beautiful hue of azure as though sapphires were spread across the top of it. The *Nereiades* advanced through the blue light with its ill-omened black sails full. The power of its electric propulsion system, which utilized the solar power of photoelectric cells affixed to its wide mainsail, was so great that the ship maintained ample speed notwithstanding strong headwinds.

The young man leaned against the prow statue for a short time before allowing a low sigh to leak from his lips. "Yeah, it's pretty, indeed. So that's the Lapis Lazuli Wall," he said.

In the distance, two smoothly undulating shores appeared. The entrance of the ocean from the Mediterranean Sea to the Black Sea—the continental shelves that pressed in on both sides from the Bosphorus Channel—flanked the outer edges of the continents that had been called Asia and Europe in ancient times. It was the meeting point between land and sea, and had become the nexus of commerce that united the two continents long before Armageddon.

Now, a stunning but very curious scene was unfolding there. A massive, dazzling sparkle—bluish-purple light that resembled sapphires—completely enveloped the channel and the banks on both sides, just like a dome. But was the event actually real? The huge blanket of light, which extended for dozens of miles, couldn't possibly be a mirage or a trick of the sunlight. Plus, it wasn't the only freak occurrence. There was also a mysterious shadow sinking slowly between the blue sparkles. What was it?

"It's beautiful. That's the Capital of the Night," mumbled the young man, spellbound.

Sealed beyond the sapphire walls were vast city streets. It was a beautiful capital city that never could have existed prior, even if various tribes had conceived of it in their wildest imaginations. Domes stood erect, narrow steeples protruded between trees, countless gates and graceful arches . . . They were the hallmarks reminiscent of an ancient city, touched by God's anger and sealed in a gem, like something out of a fairy tale.

The fact that the landscape was fast closing in on the ship served as proof that the scene was no illusion. The blue sparkles, which had been no more than small points of light minutes before, were already turning into huge walls threatening to block the ship's way.

Not appearing to be the least afraid of the walls of light that increasingly clouded his field of vision, the young man smiled contentedly. Whispering in his beautiful voice, he said, "Pleased to meet you, Imperial capital Byzantium. And goodbye, my sacrificial city."

Capital of the Night

*...They have burned her dwelling places;
Her bars are broken.
— Jeremiah 51:30*

I

The boat with black sails cut through the waves and advanced along the Bosphorus, which shone like a golden mirror. Overhead, a shining disc floated somewhat unreliably in the blood-colored sky, half-heartedly illuminating the land. The sound of a far-off steam whistle could be heard from somewhere in the red-tinged world.

"We've arrived at last," Ion Fortuna soliloquized, pushing back his hair that the sea breeze ruffled. It was unavoidable that his shaky voice would proclaim the obvious. It had been four months since he'd seen his old home in this way, after all.

The majestic dome that cut through the quiet shadows, the steeples pointing toward Heaven, and the group of ancient castles that dotted the shoreline . . . All of them were distinctly familiar.

"What do you think, Esther? What are your impressions of our Imperial capital?" Ion asked, still unable to contain his enthusiasm. Turning sideways, he called to his companion, who'd been keeping watch next to the prow statue, which was carved into a sea sprite. "Isn't it beautiful? I know of no other sight as beautiful as this. Really. What do you think?"

"Yes, it is, indeed, a pretty town," Esther replied in a reflective tone, as she pulled the collar on her unfamiliar citizen's uniform together. She was in a far-off place, her eyes mesmerized by the wondrous panorama. "It's really amazing, but it's too quiet. It seems as though the entire town is asleep."

"Like it's asleep? It doesn't only appear to be asleep, Esther. It really is asleep," Ion explained. Narrowing his eyes, which were the color of gold mixed with polished copper, he expounded on his comment for the bewildered girl. "It's eighteen hundred hours now," Ion said, his pale, androgynous face wearing a kind smile. "According to your senses, it's barely noon. It's time for healthy Imperial nobility to be settling into bed. But as long as that Lapis Lazuli Wall is there, there is no noon in our world."

"I see. It really *is* barely noon," said Esther.

Staring down at the sun's weak reflection on the water's surface, the girl, still baffled by the outside of the Lapis Lazuli Wall and its gaps, let out another sigh. A shadow flitted across her sunburned face.

Earlier, Esther had trembled considerably when the boat had passed through the wall of light that blocked its way. Until that point, the boat had been advancing along the ocean in broad daylight, but as soon as it crossed the blue light, the sky rapidly changed to twilight. If Ion hadn't caught her, she might have fallen from the deck from feeling so overwhelmed. Of course, the blue dome wasn't a product of witchcraft; it was no more than an UV-ray polarization wall. Countless microscopic lenses covered the Imperial capital like fog, so that even in sunlight, they reflected outward the specific wavelength of ultraviolet light that was harmful to Methuselahs. Because the light of other wavelengths was filtered as it entered into the dome, the twilight scene was a constant inside the Imperial capital.

"I know it bores you, but it's strange to me," admitted Esther. "Besides, it's a little cold for November."

"Are you all right, Esther?" Ion asked in a concerned voice as he extended his hand toward her rank uniform. With dainty but nimble fingers, he refastened her undone collar button. The collar he was wearing was unfastened, too, but because the citizen's uniform was black, the rank color of citizens, the slightest untidiness was obvious. He straightened the hem discreetly.

"Yes, this is good. Be careful, however. To differentiate themselves from slaves, citizens dress themselves neatly. By having only one button of your uniform out of place, you'll attract a lot of attention," Ion warned.

"Th-thank you very much," said Esther. "But this rank uniform is so troublesome. It's full of buckles and belts and everything."

Ion put his mouth to the girl's ear. "Yes. However, in the Empire, the style and color of clothes is strictly dictated by status and type of employment. Because the social status of we three is citizens of the Duchess of Moldova's family, take as much care with your uniform as you do with your speech," he instructed.

Sailors donning ash-gray attire had been toiling busily in the background. As slaves, they didn't usually understand the common speech of Rome, but Ion spoke quietly on the off chance that they did. Until the objective of the journey had been achieved and everyone was safe, he would have to avoid letting people know about his return. If he didn't, a few months of precious time and the trouble he'd gone to as a nobleman to pass as a mere citizen, would go to waste.

"I never thought it would take this much time to return home," said Ion.

The left bank of the Bosphorus, which divided the Imperial capital into east and west was known as Rumeli, or West Bank District. It was the nobles' district, and sat upon on a rather high plateau. Nobles' mansions, called *yahr*, dotted the coastline with small spaces between each structure. Focusing on an unusually large mansion among them, Ion grew impatient. When he thought about how much valuable time he'd lost, he couldn't keep from furrowing his brow.

It was Ion who'd been entrusted with the great Empress Vladika's secret orders and had made contact with Cardinal Caterina Sforza in Carthage at the beginning of August. It was still summer. This time, the Empress had recently learned the name of a foreign organization connected to a number of mysterious incidents that had happened within the Empire, so she had requested the Vatican Foreign Affairs Department, her mortal enemy, to supply information about the organization known as Orden.

Cardinal Sforza didn't refuse the Empire's first-ever request. She provided all the information the department had about said organization to one of her subordinates, Sister Esther, and had Esther accompany Ion home. That, however, spawned a heap of trouble.

Pirates attacked the smuggling ship the pair used from Carthage. And as they encountered an accident, their true identities were revealed by the inhabitants of the island where they'd washed ashore and were chased around. Somehow, they'd entered port in the Imperial territory of Alexandria in the first third of October. However, unable to arrange for a surface mail ship to the Imperial capital when they'd finally made it to Alexandria, they were forced to cross over land.

The only lucky thing that happened on the journey was when Ion met an old friend in Gaza harbor, where he and Esther had stopped along the way. A subject formerly belonging to the Duchess of Moldova's family, Mimarl had been selling medicine in the Imperial capital as an Imperial citizen and let the pair stowaway on his ship, which was returning to the Imperial capital stocked with medicines. If it weren't for the stroke of luck, it would have been difficult for Ion to return home within the year.

"If I would have used my Imperial decree authority, we could've used a warship. The journey wouldn't have taken half a month, then," Ion estimated.

"It couldn't be helped. Aren't there still people trying to kill you, Your Excellency?" asked Esther.

Finally able to avert her eyes from the so-called Capital of the Night, Esther consoled the boy, who was grinding his teeth. Combing through her elegant, cascading red hair, she shrugged her shoulders with a half-resigned expression. "Let's see, I'm sure you referred to them as 'hard-liners.' If you didn't return home stealthily, who knows what injuries you

might have sustained along the way," Esther pointed out. "You have to consider it a miracle that you arrived safely."

"Maybe. But . . . eh, damned hard-liners. I'll show them! When I report to Her Majesty, we'll strike them head-on!" Ion growled. His lips twisting, he swore at somebody who wasn't there. Still, Ion couldn't suppress his sadness from revealing itself through his eyes. Ion had suffered a great blow in Carthage from the group called hard-liners, those within Imperial nobility who advocated open hostilities against the Vatican. They'd planned to kill him using his only childhood friend, of all people. The plot was foiled by cooperation from the Vatican side, beginning with Esther.

The traitor, Radu Barvon, Baron of Luxor, had met an unnatural end; and it was obvious that he was merely the tip of the iceberg. If Ion returned home without a care, the hard-liners would undoubtedly wipe out the new Imperial envoy before he could visit the palace. Well aware of that, he hadn't dared use normal routes this time. Instead, he returned via laborious private routes. Surely by now, the hard-liners who Ion had successfully avoided would be vexed.

But no matter what happened now, Ion's victory was already apparent. If he relied on his grandmother, Mirka Fortuna, Duchess of Moldova and the most favored of the Empress's courtiers, for the remainder of the journey — if he could secretly meet with her — everything would end safely. There had been a lot of trouble, but if he'd gotten this far, his execution of the Imperial decree would already be arranged. Yes, with this, his — no, *their* — journey was over.

"Say, Esther?" Ion summoned.

"What is it, Your Excellency?" asked Esther.

The ship slowed as it approached the capital's wharf. Esther, who was staring intently at the streets of a foreign country, turned around.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

It was the end of the journey, and Ion was trying to put into words the feelings that had secretly grown in his heart during the long journey. Gazing into the girl's sparkling hazel eyes, he hesitated to deliver the words running through his head. "Well, the truth is," he began, "I have an earnest proposition for you. Um, if it's all right with you ..."

All of a sudden, a reluctant voice cut into their conversation. "Sorry for interrupting your consultation," Mimarl said. "Young sir, may I speak with you for a moment?"

Ion turned around regretfully at the sound of a voice speaking fluent Roman. "What's wrong, Mimarl?" he asked.

Mimarl Suinan, a young Terran man, scratched his head as if puzzled. Until a few years prior, he'd been a private citizen serving the Duchess of Moldova's family. Now, he was the master of this ship.

"Is there a problem?" asked Ion.

"There is a problem, but . . ." Mimarl hesitated.

Perhaps because of the nature of his business, Mimarl's Roman was considerably more fluid than Ion's. Originally, the Terrans in the Empire were largely divided into citizens in charge of intellectual work and slaves who shouldered the physical labor. To become a citizen, one had to prove high intelligence and physical ability by passing strict tests. After passing these tests and receiving an education at a series of specialty schools following the hoped-for course, only those who acquired specific units were certified with investiture as Imperial citizens. Further, those Imperial citizens who showed special promise became private citizens, binding an individual contract with any of the nobles.

Mimarl was running a business and living in the Imperial capital as an Imperial citizen, but until a few years ago he'd been a private citizen employed by a family as notable as the Duchess of Moldova's dynasty. His superiority was guaranteed; however, his wise eyes were blinking and seemed unsure.

"It's about your other guest," Mimarl said. "What in the world is the matter with him?"

As if responding to Mimarl's voice, it was then that *that* moaned eerily, rolling on the deck.

"Oooh, Esther, I'm a goner," Abel groaned, clumps of his disheveled silver hair peeking out from a crumpled blanket. With another weak moan, he said, "Ohhh, God, please do something about this trouble-filled life. Esther, for some reason, the time is ticking on my life. If I'm invited to Heaven, please bury me on a hill somewhere where the sea is visible. I'll watch over you always from there."

"Please don't be melodramatic from seasickness, Father Nightroad!" Esther scolded Abel Nightroad, the other Terran who'd accompanied Ion from the Outer. With an unusual expression for her, Esther put her hands on her hips and shook her head deplorably "I'm dying, I'm dying!" Everything you say is an exaggeration. Please persevere a little. Really, even I'm ashamed."

"You say that, but I'm really bad about seasickness," Abel confessed. With religious zeal he clung to the washbasin that he hadn't released during the entire sea voyage. His eyes, the color of a clear winter lake, often reflected the blackness of his clothing. However, his face, which was handsome in its own way when he sat quietly, was dripping with tears and snot.

"To start, my stomach is twice as delicate as a human's. For example, this morning I could only eat six slices of bread. Clearly, my stomach has shrunk. Say, Your Excellency, when we arrive at your mansion, will you treat me to dinner? I'm not asking for extravagance. The servants' leftovers will be fine," said Abel.

"There aren't any citizens in our mansion," Ion explained. "How many times have I told you, there are just automata . . . Ahem. Just eat these and be quiet."

For some reason, the exchange of casual conversation between the priest and the girl had hit a sore spot. Ion tossed some rolled-up meat jerky to Abel in effort to shut up the greedy Terran. During the journey, the man's bottomless stomach had caused considerable trouble.

"Eh, heh, heh, heh. Welcome to the party," said Abel.

Ion averted his disgusted gaze from the priest who voraciously devoured the horrid-looking jerky that even a rat would hesitate to pick up, regarding Esther with a serious face. "Esther, hadn't we better abandon this guy at some point? He's come this far, so aren't you and I enough for the rest? If so —"

"Please don't tempt me, Your Excellency. I'm at enough of a loss without that," Esther replied, shaking her head in rejection of Ion's suggestion. A moment later, a bemused look crossed her face.

Certainly, if examined objectively, what Ion said was probably correct. The duty Esther had accepted from the Duchess of Milan was ninety percent complete upon her arrival in the capital city. The priest who'd stuck with them, calling himself a bodyguard, had already finished his task, but there was more to it than that.

"We really can't abandon him in a place like this. Besides, it's going a little too far to call him a burden. He has all kinds of good points, so you have to acknowledge that much," Esther asserted.

"Him? Good points? Where?" Ion asked sarcastically.

"Well, for example . . . Let's see, I'm sorry. I can't remember any right now," Esther admitted, thinking hard, until the flock of geese high overhead had disappeared beyond

the sea's horizon. Finally, she raised one finger. "Look, don't they say everybody has one good trait, no matter how stupid and useless a person he is — even if he's a complete waste of life? So Abel has at least one. If we search our hardest, will we find it ... or won't we?"

"Esther, you really hate this guy, right?" asked Ion.

"No . . . well, something to that effect," Esther answered.

Clearing her throat once, the nun regarded their new surroundings. The ship was just approaching the largest mansion among those built on the shore. The main house, which featured a number of domes, had outbuildings that extended like wings, and the blue tiles affixed to one side gave it an elegant quality.

"Ah, what a pretty house. Could that be Your Excellency's mansion?" asked Esther.

"Yeah, that's our family's mansion," Ion replied.

As Ion proudly jutted out his chest, the ship entered the wharf with a gliding motion. When they docked at the pier extending from the mansion, Mimarl ordered that a rope ladder be let down.

"Esther, you go ahead a little ways. I'll be right there. And thanks, Mimarl," Ion hollered.

After watching Esther descend the rope ladder dragging the priest, who was still clinging to his food, Ion turned back to his former family retainer. Changing his tone to that of the loftier Imperial language, Ion thanked Mimarl for his trouble. "I absolutely won't forget your kindness. Won't you come in for a little while? I think my grandmother would be happy to see your face, too." Ion said.

"I'm happy you think so, young master, but I have to quickly finish unloading," Mimarl replied, shaking his head respectfully, but resolutely. "There are a lot of live things among the cargo, so please pardon me."

"I see. Now that you mention it, your business is selling medicines, right?" asked Ion.

That meant there must be some ingredients among the cargo that didn't work unless you kept them alive. Ion certainly understood Mimarl's wish to unload quickly. Not wanting to prod him further, Ion nodded his head. "Then I won't insist. However, you really saved us. I'll return this favor sometime."

"You're too kind. If I'm able to repay one ten thousandth of the favors I received from your grandmother, the Duchess of Moldova, I'll be happy," said Mimarl.

Ion offered his former family retainer a gracious nod and jumped onto the deck. Methuselabs had no need for rope ladders. As soon as he landed quietly on the pier about fifteen feet away, he started to follow the people who'd gone ahead, his robe fluttering elegantly behind him. But a faint, shrill voice called out to him.

"Um, young master?" asked Mimarl.

"Yes," said Ion, wearing a suspicious look on his face. Tilting his head as he looked up at Mimarl, he asked, "What is it?"

"Just ... be careful," Mimarl urged.

"Yeah, you, too," said Ion.

Smiling nonchalantly, Ion lifted his hand slightly. Before he'd left for Carthage, he never would have imagined he would thank a mere Terran like this. Was this also her influence?

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Esther," said Ion.

The ship had left the pier and was rapidly gaining speed. In the Imperial capital, the opposite side of the channel — the east bank — was the Terran district, densely packed with small houses, in contrast to the west bank.

Turning his back on the ship, which grew increasingly distant as it kicked up waves, Ion announced, "Welcome to the official Moldova residence. Make yourself at home. My grandmother has already retired for today, but tomorrow — well, by your senses it will be

tomorrow at sunset — we'll discuss the circumstances of the matter, and arrange for a secret meeting with Her Majesty. Once we do, we should be able to see Her Majesty within a day or two. During that time, you should recover from the fatigue of your journey, and expand your perspective by looking at various things outside. Do as you wish."

"Well . . ." Esther began.

Lovingly beholding the girl's face, which appeared relieved, Ion nodded. "Yes, with this, our journey is at an end."

"Yes, I'm glad," said Esther.

No matter how hard-hearted Esther was, the work had been a load too heavy for a girl who was only seventeen. She placed her hand atop the sheaf of secret documents hidden against her chest and sighed, overwhelmed by a sense of liberation from so much pressure.

To the contrary, Ion's thoughts were complicated. Of course, he was happy that he'd executed his Imperial decree. However, accepting the end of the journey was something entirely different.

"Esther?" asked Ion.

Esther glanced up as if surprised at being addressed. "Yeah?" she asked.

Ion spoke low and thoughtfully. "It's about hereafter, but you don't intend to stay here, do you?"

"Huh?" asked Esther. Her face seemed to beg the question *What is he saying?* She narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

In a shy voice, Ion replied, "Well, I like you. You're smart and brave. And more than anything, you're kind. What do you think about living here, instead of in the barbaric Outer?"

Sensing that the length of the pier was unusually short, Ion raised his voice. It was a speech he'd thought and thought about so much before, but now it was difficult when he tried to put it into words. Still, he managed to speak utilizing all of the Roman common language he knew.

"If you become my citizen, a good education and protection are guaranteed. You would enjoy incomparable cultural activity, compared to the Outer. You would never have to cross the stormy seas with your frail body, or go on errands to strange lands again. Hadn't you better send that priest back to the Duchess of Milan so you can stay here?" Ion asked.

"Thank you very much, Your Excellency the Count," said Esther.

The girl's shapely mouth broke into a smile as she bowed. The sunlight cast a golden sheen around her red hair. But the sun was somewhere that wasn't here. Or, rather, it was shining on somebody who wasn't Ion.

"I'm grateful for Your Excellency's goodwill, but there are still things left that I want to do. Until I've finished those things, it's a bit unreasonable for me to move," Esther explained.

"Things you want to do? Like what?" asked Ion.

"Well, the truth is, I don't really know that myself," said Esther. Embarrassed that she'd said something stupid, her cheeks turned a faint hue of red. Scratching her head, Esther added, "I only came here because I wanted to know why my family and friends died. So —"

"So?" Ion pressed, looking up at Esther with an earnest expression. Staring into her blue eyes, reminiscent of Lapis Lazuli, he held his tongue as if waiting for her next words.

Out of nowhere the silliest of voices interrupted their conversation. "Urn, excuse me. I'm very sorry, in the midst of this confusion . . ." Abel interjected, "But Your Excellency the Count, can I use a toilet for a bit? Something strange about that meat from before. Um . . . direct attack?"

"Wah! Father, your face is stark white!" Esther screamed.

Abel had doubled over and was holding his stomach, his face turning pale. There was also a bizarre noise coming from his abdomen.

"I kind of thought that meat was a little sour, but sure enough . . . Ugh!" moaned Abel.

"I told you not to be greedy, but you always . . ." Esther began. "Wah! Wah! Please be patient! If you have an accident in your pants here, it'll be a sensitive incident. Your Excellency the Count, um — "

"The citizens' bathroom is that way," Ion said dryly, halfheartedly pointing toward the back of the house. "You'll see it if you go straight that way."

"Over there? Sorry, we're going to use it for a while. Hey, Father, lean on my shoulder!" Esther suggested.

Glaring in the direction Ion pointed, Esther began to walk, dragging the peaked-faced priest. The sole person remaining watched pensively as the two shadows faded into the red scenery while discussing something.

"Sheesh," Ion sighed. Sulking, he thought to himself, / *racked my brains over that*. . . .

There wasn't a hidden motive in what he'd said to Esther. Ion was an Imperial nobleman, and she was only a Terran. It was a proposal of pure advice. Or was it?

"It can't be helped, even if I think of her fondly," said Ion.

Breathing deeply, Ion shook his head as if to shake off his thoughts. It was true that his Imperial decree wasn't fulfilled until he safely petitioned to see Her Majesty. Perking up his shoulders, Ion placed his hand on the front door.

Ion's return home this time was top secret. Before he introduced the two members of his party directly, he had to have a little talk with his grandmother. Pushing open the door with the Moldova family crest — the Unicorn Rampant — he announced his arrival as if he were a child sneaking back into his home after a late night.

"Grandmother, it's Ion. I've just returned," said Ion.

Wondering whether his grandmother would be surprised by his sudden reemergence, Ion prepared himself for her to greet him with a slightly disagreeable, but affectionate face. Several relatives had raised him since his mother had died in his infancy, but among them, his grandmother had particularly loved him. Surely, she would be pleased by the success of his duty.

In spite of his curiosity, Ion didn't hear a response.

The inside of the mansion was dyed red.

II

Bright red pools of liquid let off steam, indicating the substance was still warm. Severed limbs and pieces of bodies were strewn throughout the drafty hall. Atop a steaming red rug, a number of severed heads with beautiful but vacant stares rolled around like strange fruit.

"Wha?!" Ion cried.

Ten seconds had passed, and Ion was still frozen in the same position he was in when he opened the door. When his brain finally regained a portion of its functionality, Ion noticed that all of the severed heads had the same face, that of a young woman who was stunning but lacking vitality. And it wasn't the smell of blood that wafted from the red liquid staining the floor; it was an oily, metallic smell.

"Th-these are automata? But this is . . ." Ion choked.

The automata, delicate enough to be mistaken for humans at first glance, were proof of the wealth of a great lord. However, there weren't merely a few remains sunk in a sea of subcutaneous circulation fluid. Ion groaned as he stared at them. There were at least ten. Ion couldn't understand who in the world had destroyed so many – and why.

Looking away from the brutally severed heads, Ion concluded, "That's it! Grandmother! My grandmother!"

His grandmother, Mirka, Duchess of Moldova, didn't have citizens in her mansion, probably because she was a very eccentric woman. "Because I don't want to shower my feelings on Terrans, who die right away," she'd said.

It was careless to rely only on automata in this large mansion. Again and again, Ion had advised her to summon loyal citizens from their domain, but that stubborn, arrogant, willful old woman wouldn't listen to advice from a grandchild. After all, the Duchess of Moldova was first among Imperial nobility. It would be difficult to guess the rebels who'd try to kill her.

"Grandmother! Where are you, Grandmother?" Ion bellowed. His heart seized by fear and impatience, Ion shouted again. But his voice just echoed vainly down the corridors connected by a gentle arch.

Suddenly, a noise reverberated. Ion strained his ears at the sounds echoing from the ceiling. It was the sound of many hard boots.

"Grandmother!" cried Ion. Too impatient to run up the stairs, he pushed against the floor and thrust up as though he'd sprouted wings. Landing on the second floor, he charged down the wide corridor, where he was sure he'd heard the boots. Only his grandmother's bedroom was there.

As he kicked down the door and leapt into the bedroom, Ion wailed, "Grandmother! Are you all right, Grandmo – "

The young man's face twisted.

"Th-these are . . ." he mumbled.

The room, decorated with a blue mosaic and a carpet, was simple for the bedroom of the highest nobility in the Empire. The only pieces of furniture that stood out were a washbasin placed next to the entrance, and a desk. The windows facing the terrace were wide open, and a sea breeze from the Halic made the curtains tremble.

But now, the stench of subcutaneous circulation fluid filled the room, nearly making Ion choke. The remains of obliterated automata rolled about the normally spotless room. The walls had changed color to red-black, splattered by the abhorrent fluid.

It wasn't the gruesome sight that caused Ion's face to blanch, however. Three human figures stood surrounding the main bed in the middle of the room. Their entire bodies were cloaked in black Outer-style military overcoats, and their faces were hidden under helmets and gas masks. No matter how he tried, Ion would never forget the look of death itself modeled in human form.

The droplets rolling off the bright red-stained bed, combined with the giants' hefted battleaxes, cleared Ion's consciousness momentarily, allowing the nightmare he'd witnessed in Carthage to briefly enter his mind.

"DAMN YOU!" Ion roared as sharp fangs protruded from his upturned lips. The strongest fighting creature on Earth – the Methuselah boy – unsheathed the short sword at his hip without hesitation. "How dare you, my grandmother. Unforgivable! I absolutely won't forgive you!"

Although the young man's features had transformed into those of a demon, the three massive men didn't show any signs of flinching. Instead, they turned toward the boy with

a swiftness that belied their huge size, each raising his weapon and assuming battle stance. Actually, only two of the men lifted their axes; the third had his head pulverized along with his axe before he could get into position.

"One!" shouted Ion.

As the large man collapsed, his brains spewing uncontrollably, Ion's shadow suddenly burst out of nowhere, grasping his unsheathed blade. He used a special power unique to Methuselahs that stimulated all the nerves in his body, giving him a reaction speed much faster than he normally possessed. Because his body was in overdrive, it resembled no more than a faint shadow, but it was all-powerful. He thrust out his weapon so ferociously that it sounded like the scream of an evil spirit as it slashed the face of the second man.

"Two!" Ion proclaimed.

The center of the second man's gas mask pierced his nasal cartilage, and the sword completely destroyed his brain matter. Tugging blood and brains from the back of the monster's head along with it, Ion yanked out the blade and kicked the limp figure, causing it to hurtle across the room.

"Three," Ion continued as he thrust the point of his sword toward the giant, who had his back turned to Ion. The attack, executed with exquisite speed and timing, was destructive enough to pulverize the third man's heart. It was already too late when Ion noticed that, to his surprise, the last figure standing before him was merely a shadow.

"Argh, these monsters have that ability, too?" said Ion.

Having weathered the battle in Carthage, Ion should have known everything about their battle strength. But his fury seemingly robbed him of calm judgment.

Swiveling his head, Ion searched for the enemy who'd disappeared as if a mirage, when his body unexpectedly flew through the air following a blow to his side.

"Ow!" he cried.

The force of the blow was powerful enough to embed Ion's body deep into the wall after its fifteen-foot journey. If he hadn't instinctually raised his sword a half a second later, his body would have been cut in two and scattered onto the floor and ceiling. Regrettably, his good fortune only lengthened Ion's continued torment.

Buried in the broken wall, Ion groaned as his mouth leaked a stream of blood. Its color, strangely bright, probably meant that a broken rib had pierced his lung. Still unable to move, he watched closely as an ominous shadow appeared over his head.

"You!" Ion coughed. He ground his teeth so hard that his fangs nearly broke, but regardless of his hostility, his body didn't budge.

In contrast to the limp Ion, the giant stood almighty, towering over the young man. The massive figure slowly heaved his axe upward, preparing for its swift descent.

"Please escape, Your Excellency!" Esther cried.

If the barrage of bullets that accompanied the shrill voice hadn't struck the enemy's face, Ion's head would have become red and gray goo.

As she sprayed the enemy with a second round, watching the giant stagger, its helmet blown off, Esther shouted again. "What are you doing? Hurry! Run!"

The priest groaned as he rummaged through the belongings of one of the bodies that had collapsed earlier in the attack. "This is a bit grim, Esther. If this bunch is . . ." Abel began. As soon as he removed the giant's thick coat, he frowned at what was underneath it. "As I thought. Uh-oh! Esther, please tell the Count to escape quickly!"

"Esther . . . Father? My grandmother . . . My grandmother is . . ." Ion murmured, coughing weakly as he finally rose.

Ion's battered head gave him so much pain that he felt as though it would split in two. His eyes were clouded by blood, which nearly blinded him. He didn't even notice the giant next to him,-who had lost half his head, raising his axe.

"Your Excellency, be careful! Beside you!" Esther hollered.

One silver bullet, fired instantaneously, pierced the attacker's hip. This time the giant was sent reeling, so much so that he toppled over, shaking the ground. Facing upward, the wounded monster flapped its limbs like an insect that had been pinned down. It was possible that because part of his control system had been destroyed, he wasn't able to stand up.

"Count of Memphis, run! It's dangerous here!" Esther urged again.

But it wasn't Esther's voice that Ion heard as he stood dumbstruck. The priest, who stood up hurriedly, wailed a proverb in a shrill voice. "There are those who set traps to catch us, like casting nets to catch birds.' It's a trap! We've been caught in a trap!"

"Trap? What do you mean, trap, Father? Wait a minute! What are you doing?" Esther screamed as she was suddenly picked up.

Abel ran off at full speed, ignoring the girl's protests. Along the way, he grabbed the collar of the boy who stood floppily, like a rag doll.

Ion regained consciousness as soon as the reality of his companion's rather rude behavior set in. "Let me go, Father!" he insisted as he clawed and yelled in effort to free himself from Abel's grip. "Grandmother ... Grandmother!" Ion screamed.

"Please give up on your grandmother. Let's just get away from here quickly!" Abel yelled. It was the first time Ion had heard Abel speak in a serious tone the entire journey. "These guys intend to blow themselves up!"

At first, Ion couldn't understand what his companion was saying. It was when his gaze fell to the floor and he spotted the corpses of the large men he'd taken down, that he finally understood what Abel meant.

The assailants' coats were wide open, revealing their sturdy bodies. But what were those bags hanging against their chests like chain mail? There were countless bags, connected by threads. And Ion was certain that at the ends of the coats there were clocks ticking away.

"Bombs?" Ion exclaimed. His face looked absolutely petrified.

Abel continued to run toward the only window in the room, still clinging onto Ion and Esther. When he made it to the windowsill, he hurtled his body out the window. Immediately after the trio made their escape, there was a flash so bright that it seemed as though the sun had come crashing to the ground, followed by a shockwave so strong that one would've thought the atmosphere had imploded.

The hellfire incinerated the bedroom in an instant and caused a back draft that exceeded three thousand degrees. The air evolved into a transparent tsunami, swallowing everything in its midst.

"Gah!" moaned Abel, whose tall body struck the lawn of the front garden first, with a resounding splat.

One after the other, Ion and Esther landed on Abel's head.

"Owww!" the redheaded girl grimaced, tending to her aching bum. Teary-eyed, she asked, "Are you all right, Your Excellency? Are you hurt?"

"Um, yeah," Ion replied curtly. All he could muster was a rude answer. His eyes, gazing at the white flames, were glassy and expressionless.

The fire consumed the mansion with uncanny speed. Even a child could see that in the area where flames were visible, trying to fight the fire would be futile.

"What in the world happened? Grandmother . . . why in the world?" the boy nobleman, who'd lost his home and grandmother in the blink of an eye, muttered blankly.

Why had this happened? And what should he do now? Unable to collect his thoughts, he asked the tall shadow standing beside him. "Father Nightroad, what should I do now? What should I — "

"Be quiet!" Abel snapped, peering intently at their surroundings. Holding his finger in front of his lips, he said in a barely audible voice, "This is bad. There are too many. We're surrounded."

"Surrounded?" Ion repeated, unaware that there were still enemies among them.

The dire situation shook Ion back into reality. Turning his head in the direction Abel was staring, Ion scanned the scene, but all he saw were plants waving in the breeze and the dim sparkle of the sea. He couldn't see a trace of anything resembling an enemy.

"Father, how are we surrounded?" asked Ion.

Not half a second had passed when a few dozen people appeared in a spot that was previously unoccupied. Ion rubbed his eyes in disbelief wondering when and how the bodies had appeared.

Below the ominous red sunlight, the members of the group surrounding the trio appeared even more menacing in their scarlet armor and blood red capes. The crimson masks layered under low-hanging hats bore no expression. The figures' hands grasped weapons that resembled large hunting rifles, and immense swords hung at their hips.

"Ienichieri!" Ion howled, taking one step forward in spite of Abel and Esther's attempts to shield the young man. Speaking as though his throat was obstructed, Ion extended his hand toward the red soldiers.

"Ieni . . .What?" asked Esther.

"Palace Guards! I believe they are a Methuselah force under the Empress's direct command. But this is strange, because, according to what I've heard, they rarely leave the palace," Abel explained.

Abel and Esther continued to discuss the matter behind Ion's back when Ion called out to a large black man, the only one among the crimson soldiers whose face was unmasked.

"Lord Baybars! Aren't you Lord Baybars? You've arrived just in time! My home . . . My grandmother . . ." Ion's voice shook so much that it was almost piercing, but having lost an important member of his family and his home, it was unavoidable.

Baybars narrowed his steely eyes at the boy. "I denounce you, Ion Fortuna, Count of Memphis."

All of a sudden, bursting flames sent the soldiers' spine-chilling shadows back into the ground. The Chief of the Palace Guards didn't even bother brushing off the falling embers. Standing tall, he announced in a clear and resonant voice, "I arrest you in the name of the Empire and Her Majesty the Empress. The charges are the murder of the Duchess of Moldova and the burning of her mansion. Come quietly, Count of Memphis."

"What?" Ion exclaimed.

The sound of long swords being unsheathed pummeled Ion's eardrums as he stood gasping.

III

"The murder of the Duchess of Moldova? You're c-crazy!" Ion stammered.

The long sword with seven prongs sparkled like obsidian and bore the phrase, "He Who Breaks Spinal Cords." The reflection of Ion's face, twisted in amazement, consternation, and anger was visible in the weapon.

"You're suggesting I did this, Lord Baybars? That I, of all people, the Duchess of Moldova's grandson, harmed my own grandmother?" Ion wailed defensively.

"You had better refrain, Count of Memphis," Baybars warned. His expression was calm but vengeful as he pointed the sword toward the boy.

"Multiple eye-witnesses spotted you entering the mansion earlier. And then there was a conflagration immediately afterward. Isn't that enough for you to be a suspect?" asked Baybars.

"I-I didn't do it! By the time I returned home, the rebels were already in the house," said Ion.

"Rebels?" Baybars replied.

The Palace Guards remained silent and as still as dolls. Standing in the center of the guards, Baybars said gravely, "Then I will ask you, Count of Memphis. Where are those rebels now? And why did you sneak back into the Imperial capital, despite being entrusted with an Imperial decree? Why didn't you return openly and visit the Celestial Imperial Palace? Can I get you to explain so that I can understand?"

"That's ..." Ion was at a loss for words.

He, Abel, and Esther had defeated all of those rebels, leaving their corpses in the fire. Even if they had seized them, they couldn't get testimony from corpses.

"It seems as though words have failed you," Baybars pointed out. His black eyes, reminiscent of burnt steel, moved from Ion, who was frozen stiff, to the Terrans behind the boy. "As an Imperial noble, it isn't my intention to create a big to-do. We should arrest all of the Terrans in the same fashion. If not, we should kill them here."

"K-kill . . . kill me?" Ion shrieked. He had endured unbelievably bad luck, and now there was this humiliation. Raising his sword, he shouted hysterically, "Don't joke while unjustly accusing someone, servant!"

"No, Your Excellency!" said Abel. The panicked priest tried to restrain Ion from behind, but by that time, the young man's body had entered haste mode, and had disappeared leaving only a dim outline. A stack of white smoke billowed quickly toward the row of Palace Guards in the place he'd been standing.

"You all, don't interfere," Baybars ordered, his eyes fixed on the white smoke kicked up by the Methuselah during haste transition. He refused to lose his nerve. Agilely grasping his prized sword, he declared fearlessly, "Regrettable. If you had studied for the next hundred years, you might have become a master!"

Before Baybars' eyes, the boy reappeared like a phantom only fifteen feet away, grasping his naked sword. At the same time, Baybars swung down the black sword, "He Who Breaks Spinal Cords," causing a peculiar sound.

Had the Chief of the Palace Guards, of all people, misjudged the distance to his enemy? The seven-pronged blade hit the ground, but completely missed Ion, who, with unwavering steadiness, waited for the black blade to pass him before thrusting his sword at his attacker.

A second later, it was Ion who was propelled in the opposite direction by the dangerous weapon. His entire body was forced backward as though an invisible sword had hit it. His strong frame flitted weightlessly through the air like a feather on the breeze. If he were a Terran, he would have undoubtedly fallen to his death. But using the skills innate to Methuselahs, he rounded his body like a cat and succeeded in landing unscathed.

Examining the blade of his sword, Ion's lips trembled in horror. "What now?"

Large cracks etched through the reinforced titanium blade, which was sharp enough to cut iron. It was the doing of the invisible sword from before. If Ion hadn't intercepted it with his short sword, his trunk would have been severed.

"I'll warn you once, boy," said Baybars in a hush.

Ion leapt sideways. He tried to gain distance from Baybars, who was closing in on him, brandishing his seven-pronged sword, but the Palace Guards Chief didn't follow. Instead, he swung down his sword toward his prey.

"Battle isn't merely wrangling from the front. Except for cases where there's a considerable difference in actual ability, you mustn't start attacking when your own life is at risk. Especially if you don't even know what's in your opponent's hand," said Baybars.

As Baybars spoke, Ion saw the seven prongs of "He Who Breaks Spinal Cords" flash blue-white. Instinctively, Ion heaved his sword in front of his body, saving his own life once again.

The seven-pronged blade had produced an electromagnetic field that allowed it to attack the boy invisibly.

Ion's eyes widened with disbelief as he watched his blade break cleanly. Meanwhile, Baybars' countenance was stony as he thrust the seven-pronged blade at the boy, still gripping the remnants of his weapon.

"The match is over. You've lost, boy," said Baybars. He spoke not as if he were an egotistical man boasting of his victory, but rather as a conscientious teacher. Drawing the seven-pronged sword back into his hand, Baybars lifted its tip to his face. "If you call yourself an Imperial nobleman, you should surrender."

Ion flinched. *I'll be killed!* he thought. Shutting his eyes, he imagined his head being lopped off and the trail of blood that would be left behind, a vision that made him close his eyes even tighter.

Suddenly, one of the Methuselahs who hadn't yet fought shouted out, "Keep your eyes closed!" Abel, who'd been doing something in the background, threw a small bag he'd had in his hand since looting the attackers' corpses into the air. The red soldiers' eyes followed the bag as it flew overhead in an arc, scattering white powder. The next instant, it exploded with a flash of light.

Baybars seemed flabbergasted.

The Methuselahs' excellent vision now became their worst enemy.

The Ienichieri covered their eyes, their optic nerves burned by a light so intense that it appeared as though the sun had set directly on Earth. The rapid combustion of potassium permanganate, a powerful oxidizing agent, and powdered aluminum dust created a storm of fireballs from above. It was the same lethal combination that had burned down the Duchess of Moldova's mansion.

"Now, Your Excellency!" cried Abel as he lifted an old-fashioned revolver that was still smoldering. He darted toward the petrified Ion, pulling Esther, who was groaning with her eyes covered, along with him. "What are you waiting for? Escape now!"

"Escape?" said Ion. "But, Father, I haven't done anything wrong."

There had to be some mistake. This kind of thing shouldn't be happening.

Abel grasped Ion's hand and made him stand up. "God says, 'Run! Save your own life!' If you're killed here, you won't be able to clear your name!"

"Ugh!" Ion cringed.

For once, what the priest said was right. The difference between their fighting abilities was undeniable. Ion shook his head as if to rid it of regrets. Glaring at Abel as if he were the enemy, he said, "Hang on! Father! Esther!"

Suddenly, the outlines of Ion's small shadow grew blurry, the nerves throughout his body protesting his previous overuse of haste mode. Trying to keep his nerves at bay, Ion forcefully kicked the ground in effort to escape.

"I won't let you escape, traitor!" Baybars grumbled.

The black blade glistened and appeared to have expertly cut the boy's shadow in half.

"Hmmm, he's good at escaping," Baybars said, realizing his weapon had been unsuccessful.

Still holding his sword downward, the black Methuselah laughed quietly as he examined deep footprints in the ground. A scrap of black uniform rested on the floor next to the blade, but neither the boy's corpse nor any sign of his companions were apparent.

"There is little hope for him ... no matter how far he goes," said Baybars.

Despite the fact that the enemy – a traitor who'd killed a senior statesperson – had escaped, there was no sign of discouragement on Baybars' face. On the contrary, he wore a satisfied smile as he talked to himself.

"Now the curtain has risen. Dance well, boy," said Baybars.

IV

"Urgh!" Esther moaned. They had plummeted with considerable speed, so it was lucky that they landed on a sandy beach, or they wouldn't have gotten away with minor scratches.

"Owww! I-I thought I was going to die," said Esther, moaning weakly as she tried to make her sand-covered body sit upright.

The trio had no idea how far away from the Duchess of Moldova's mansion they were. All they could see were the waves quietly crashing against the shoal.

Standing up, treading on the white sand that had absorbed the shock of the group's fall, Esther called to her companions. "Are you all right, Father? Your Excellency the Count?"

"I am . . . somehow. Count, are you okay?" asked Abel.

Silence greeted the priest's question.

Buried up to his shoulders in a sand dune, Ion didn't try to stand up. His four limbs twitched independent of one another.

"Oh, no. Please hang on, Your Excellency!" Esther pleaded. Flustered, she ran to the exhausted Methuselah and cleared the sand from his child-like body. To her horror, he was still straining to breathe.

It was not unusual for a Methuselah to fall victim to exhaustion after engaging haste mode. The abnormal amounts of potassium and sodium that were secreted in the state caused inflammation of all the body's nerves; the brain; and the muscles, which fall into a blood-depleted state and lose their strength from malnutrition. Ion's pain would torment him for some time.

But there was nothing Esther could do now. All anyone could do was wait for the Methuselah's body to recover naturally over time.

What in the world are we going to do now? Esther thought to herself as she glumly combed the hair hanging over Ion's pale face.

The young man had lost everything, and on top of that, was being pursued as a criminal. Esther was stuck in this foreign land, where there wasn't anybody to rely on. So far from carrying out her duty, she felt like no more than a little girl whose life was in danger.

What in the world should we do now? Esther thought to herself again.

"We'll rest a little while, and move as soon as Count of Memphis can do so," said Abel, as if he were consciously trying to stop the nun's thoughts from heading in an even more negative direction.

Abel stood up nonchalantly, wiping sand off his butt as he sifted through Ion's baggage. As soon as he found a blood-building medicine about the size of a claw, he threw it into a canteen and tossed it over to Esther.

"Esther, please offer His Excellency the Count some Aqua Vitae. While you do that, I'll go investigate this area a bit," said Abel.

"Father, you said, 'move,' but .. ." Esther began, drifting off.

She understood that they couldn't stay here forever. She didn't know anything about the Imperial capital's geography, but she did know their coordinates couldn't be very far from the Duchess of Moldova's mansion. It was possible that they might be pursued and captured at any time.

But where could they go? It wasn't likely that there were any areas of the capital in which foreigners wouldn't be conspicuous.

Abel shook his head decisively. "I might actually have an idea about one god of rescue."

Esther blinked. "God of rescue?" She'd thought that this was the priest's first time in the Imperial capital, just as it was hers, but perhaps that wasn't true after all.

"Yes, but maybe I should say *goddess* of rescue," said Abel, showing no sign that he was aware of Esther's doubts.

Abel scratched his chin as if a flurry of cold air had tickled it. "She's a little short-tempered and haughty, and I don't know what she'll do if we make her angry. But on this occasion, we can't ask too much. Let's prepare ourselves to see her."

V

"Welcome home, Mistress. Would you like a hot bath, or a meal first?" asked the citizen.

"A hot bath would be good. I only just ate at the Celestial Imperial Palace," Astharoshe answered.

Handing the reins to one of the servants who greeted her, Astharoshe, the Marquise of Kiev, dismounted her favorite horse. After lovingly petting its nose, she passed by her family retainers with a long stride, as they stood respectfully at attention. She had a slim body; long, flowing white hair; and was fairly tall for a woman. But her gait was both strong and graceful, like that of a wild leopard about to hunt.

"By the way, old man, what's today's bath?" asked Astharoshe curtly.

"I've prepared an emulsion of banyan tree. I used water from Beograd," the steward, Chadarli Kara Haril, replied in a polite tone. As the old Terran who'd served the Marquise of Kiev's family for generations followed his mistress's every move, he expertly removed her outer garment, long robe, and dolman from behind. A model citizen, he never forgot to tend to his mistress's feelings, which at this point, seemed to be suspicious of an insect's whereabouts.

"By the way, Mistress, you were very slow to return home today. How were things at the Imperial Palace?" Chadarli asked.

"I accepted Her Majesty's invitation when I arrived. Therefore I'm late," Astharoshe replied.

"Her Majesty's invitation? That's considerate, is it not?" asked Chadarli. The large-framed old Terran twirled his white whiskers as if surprised by his mistress's unenthusiastic answer.

The Marquise of Kiev was a family noted for its lineage in the Empire, but it hadn't been long since the exchange of power took place. As for its current mistress, the young girl, merely seventh rank, was appointed Directly Reporting Chief Inspector. It was quite a stroke of luck that the Empress would give such a title to a girl holding a relatively lowly post.

Cocking his head in surprise about Astharoshe's title, the wise old man suddenly clapped his hands. "Does it have something to do with the work you did in the Outer a while ago, Mistress?" asked Chadarli.

"Well done, old man. You're exactly right," said Astharoshe with a straight face. After skillfully removing the sash clip at her hip with one hand, she lowered her voice. "An envoy from the Vatican will be arriving soon in the Empire. I was confidentially ordered to look after him."

"An envoy from the Outer?" Chadarli asked. "Well, why is that — "

"I don't know," said Astharoshe, cutting off the citizen sharply.

Chadarli couldn't see her face as she played with the ruby-encrusted sash clip in her fingers, but an aura of displeasure was emanating from her back like steam.

"Her Majesty sent a secret envoy to the Outer a few months ago. He's being accompanied by the Vatican envoy and is scheduled to return within a day or two. My Imperial order this time is to guard him," explained Astharoshe.

"Her Majesty's secret envoy?" Chadarli asked, looking perplexed.

The Outer was a barbaric world. Terrans from other places were ignorant and cruel savages who didn't hesitate to call Methuselabs "vampires." The Empress who'd sent a secret envoy in the midst of such savages had made a very brave decision. There was something very unusual about the move, however.

While placing a dressing gown over his mistress's shoulders, the old steward whispered bemusedly, "If we're talking about a secret envoy, why wasn't the Imperial decree given to you, Mistress? No matter what you say, you have the most authority among the lords. That — "

"I don't know that," the rarely amiable Astharoshe interjected bluntly. Turning her back on Chadarli with her nose in the air, she added, as if sulking, "It's an important matter of state. Because of that, the Empress probably decided that the load was too heavy for an underling such as I. Regardless, if Her Majesty is being thoughtful, I'm not going to question it."

Although Astharoshe was trying to be diplomatic, it was clear she wasn't happy that this plan had advanced without her knowledge or participation. She'd been in the Outer three years ago, and after she returned, she'd immersed herself too deeply in research about that world. So much so that she earned the nickname "Terran-lover." Her depth of knowledge about the Outer and the Terrans was likely unparalleled among the nobles of her generation. Anyone would understand if there was indignation swirling darkly about her heart. After all, none of her hard work had been recognized.

"Strange, isn't it?" asked the beautiful woman as she halted before a corridor leading to the garden bathroom.

The twilight stained the expanse of the garden sepia.

"What's the matter, Mistress?" asked Chadarli.

Ignoring the old man's concern, The Marquise of Kiev fondled the sash clip. Her amber-hued eyes flashed cautiously as she turned to the voice behind her.

"By the way, old man, are any visitors scheduled for today?" Astharoshe inquired.

"No, there aren't," Chadarli replied. "This week's visitors are expected to be the Viscount of Nicaea tomorrow, and the Count of Tabriz the day after tomorrow. As for today —"

"Hmph! So the group over there are uninvited guests?" asked Astharoshe.

"Huh?" Chadarli replied.

By the time Chadarli answered, his mistress's delicate hand was already waving excitedly. With monstrous strength, she had hurled her sash clip, which landed near a shadow of a Zelkova tree standing next to the fence in a corner of the rear garden. Branches on the towering tree that Chadarli had cared for since his previous master's reign rustled about, but the sash clip disappeared as if absorbed by the tree's green shade. But the clip hadn't actually disappeared.

Somebody trying to sneak into the grounds, over the fence and through the tree branches, received a painful blow to the face and fell to the ground.

"Blargh!" Abel screamed.

"Father!"

It had become clear that there wasn't only one invader. Two small shadows wailed atop the fence, their cat-like screeches overlapping discordantly.

"Th-those people, Mistress?" asked Chadarli, somewhat taken aback.

No sooner did her steward ask did Astharoshe leap out into the corridor. Jumping nearly a hundred feet in three seconds, she drew an ominously flashing saber from her hip. "Don't move, the three of you! This is the Imperial noblewoman Marquise of Kiev's mansion!"

Turning her menacing eyes toward the young man squirming on the ground just below the point of her sword, then to the two people on the fence, the Imperial noblewoman warned, "I hope you're prepared for the results of invading my territory."

The next instant, Astharoshe recognized the man upside down on the ground peering up at the beautiful woman. "Y-you?" she exclaimed.

"Yeah, hi," said Abel. He didn't seem the least bit afraid of the unsheathed sword pointed at his chest. He even giddily waved his hand at Astharoshe. "Long time no see, Ast ... I completely forgot to write. Hahaha!"

Chadarli couldn't stop himself from intervening. "You ruffian!" he shouted, glaring at the intruder who was smiling as if he didn't have a care in the world. "A ruffian who knows this is the mansion of Asran, the Marquise of Kiev, I might add. Come, everyone. There's a thief! Come!"

"Ahhh, no, it's fine," said Astharoshe, shaking her head. As she returned her sword to its holster, she released an unusually deflated sigh and said, "It's fine, old man. You needn't summon anybody."

"Huh? N-no, but, Mistress ..." said Chadarli.

"I know this guy. It'll be too noisy if you summon anybody. More importantly, may I ask what this means, uninvited guest?" asked Astharoshe.

After quieting her still fretful steward, Astharoshe Asran, the Marquise of Kiev, effortlessly grabbed onto the man scratching his head by the collar as if she had just caught a feral cat wandering in. Breaking into a smile mixed with ill-will and affection, she said, "Don't expect that your manufactured excuses will assuage my doubts like they did three years ago, Abel Nightroad, my partner."

VI

The New Human Empire was the largest and greatest non-human nation in the world. The *boyar*, or nobles, who were all Methuselahs, controlled the government and military. They

were the masters with territories everywhere, and also the highest-class bureaucrats who occupied central posts.

The Duchess of Moldova family were made up of great lords who unified the broad territory from Moldavia, in the northeastern part of the Empire, to Bessarabia. The current head of their family, Mirka Fortuna, Duchess of Moldova, was employed as Chief Privy Counselor, which should be called First Prime Minister. Her grandson, Ion Count of Memphis, was Chief Imperial Sword Bearer and held a post dealing with the kinds of Imperial decrees that belonged to the State Secrets Institution, the Empress's investigation organization. The outfit entrusted the fulfillment of duties under their jurisdiction to other family members of loyal citizens, while they stayed in the Imperial capital on official business.

Noble bureaucrats like the Moldova family had what are called capital-mansions that they used for dwellings in the Imperial capital, or as public offices. That afternoon, it was a beachside capital-mansion where a young guest with flowing blue hair was invited.

"I've gotten the attack documentation confirmed. Thanks for your hard work so soon after returning home, Baron," said the owner.

From the tea pavilion erected in the courtyard, one could enjoy a stellar view of the glistening Halic that lay below the hill. As soon as he drew up the sofa opposite his guest, the owner also sat down -on a gorgeous gold-embroidered cushion. He tossed a sugar cube-sized box — a data storage memory cube — that he removed from his pocket onto the table.

"You killed the Duchess of Moldova, burned down her mansion, and put the blame on her grandson. Honestly, when I first heard of it, I thought it was a plan that was far too involved, but it seems you were able to carry it out splendidly," said the owner.

"I'm pleased. I hope that my work has made up for my many clumsy failures in Carthage," said Radu.

The young guest quietly shook his head. And when he picked up the cube containing image data that the Jaegers had sent from the scene of the assault, there was no sign of pride in his bronze eyes. Holding the transparent cube in his delicate palm, Radu said, "My only regret is that I didn't take the Duchess of Moldova's head. The assassins I sent were unexpectedly useless. If we'd been able to restrain Count of Memphis a little better, I would have brought back her head."

"Those dolls you brought back with you? You shouldn't have relied on Outer things. But that kind of failure is well within the allowable range," said the owner.

Accepting tea brought by an automaton waiter, the owner's meaty lips split into a smile. Fangs, long even by Methuselah standards, poked out his crescent moon-shaped mouth.

"One hour ago, the Palace Guards discovered a burnt body in the ruins that appears to be the Duchess of Moldova: It was burnt black, but DNA analysis has revealed that it's her. A public announcement will probably be made at tonight's conference," said the owner.

"So, step one of the plan is safely finished? The Count of Memphis's movements have been as predicted," reported Radu. The blue-haired Methuselah relaxed his face before placing a hand on the fragrant liquid placed before him. He met the owner's cautious gaze with a sweet smile.

"Yes, tomorrow's conference should be very interesting. When they've learned about Count of Memphis's and the Terrans' — the *Vatican's* plot—I wonder how everyone will react. I'm really looking forward to it," said the owner, grinning like a bird of prey. His eyes wandered toward the opposite shore of the Halic.

In contrast to the north coast, which resembled a high-class residential district, the south shore was packed densely with trees that looked like a green carpet from above. Between the trees, sharp spires and grand domes towered here and there.

The Celestial Imperial Palace was where the master of the capital—the person who controlled all of the nobles for eternity—dwelled.

A glimmer shone in the owner's eyes as he studied the palace. "It's already been more than eight hundred years since that person's rule began. At last this time has come. Tomorrow will be the fatal day that decides the future of us and of this nation. I think you must be tired, Baron, but I will have you do one more thing," said the owner.

"I know," said Radu. With a low chuckle, the blue-haired young man slowly closed his hand around the memory cube. A blue-white flame flashed out from between his fingers.

"We must reform the world by fire. If possible, we must bring about a new order in this land with our strength," said the owner.

The Jade Palace

*Vengeance is mine.
— Romans 12:19*

I

As the dimly shining disc sank beyond the horizon, twilight evolved into night.

The lights that began to illuminate the city where the blue curtain fell resembled a slew of fireflies dancing madly, pledging their love. A quiet, but busy, hum reverberated through the atmosphere, as the sound of horse carriages belonging to nobles visiting the Imperial palace bustled about the main street.

"The day begins at sunset? I'm really not used to that," Esther said with a sigh.

She was already familiar with the Imperial-style time system, which used the spring and autumn sunset as standard midnight time; but she added two hours, because she'd passed through Alexandria and Misr on the way. But that didn't mean her body was used to a lifestyle that reversed day and night. Because she spent her life in Rome getting up at five in the morning and going to bed at ten at night, her activity cycle was about a half day off.

If I hadn't made a habit of having a hot bath right after getting up, could I have managed? Lifting her arms languidly, Esther stretched fully, trying to shake her grogginess.

Imperial people's love of baths was common among Methuselaha and Terran alike. There were always large public baths in the capital, places where citizens could socialize. Nobles' mansions were also always equipped with private hot baths. The baths came in all shapes and sizes, large and small, but the Marquise of Kiev's setup was very standard, equipped with cold baths and steam baths in other rooms.

"Ahhh, this feels heavenly," said Esther.

When she submerged her body in hot water, all the horrific moments of the recent past—the running amid blood and flames—faded away. Scooping up the milky white water with her hands, Esther narrowed her eyes. "What is this hot water, anyway? It feels good, but it's making me terribly slippery. It can't be water scale, can it?"

"To have water scale would be rude. Terran girl," Astharoshe replied huskily with regard to the suggestion that she would tolerate any sort of buildup in her bath. "The bathrooms in my home are cleaned every day."

"M-Marquise of Kiev!" Esther shouted shrilly after noticing the shadow beyond the steam nearing.

"The slippery texture comes from my family's secret emulsion. It's made by melting essential oils of Mirura, longevity chrysanthemum, fennel, Olivanum, and more, into a cream made of sea-cow milk. It's the absolute best when you're tired. It also works when you have a chill," said Astharoshe.

Esther realized that the Marquise of Kiev was using Roman common tongue fluently and grew concerned that her superior had heard her rude thoughts.

"E-excuse me! I, um . . . was taking a bath. I'll get out at once!" said Esther as she hurriedly jumped out of the bathtub, frantically covering her front.

Before Esther could escape, powerful fingers grasped her hand.

"I don't mind. Regardless of the fact that you're a Terran, as long as you're in my home, you are my guest," said Astharoshe.

The unbelievably gorgeous woman exposed her naked body without shame, pushing Esther back into the bathtub. She tousled her ivory hair with blood-colored fringe and said coolly, "You should make yourself at home. Your name is Esther, correct?"

"Yes, I'm Esther Blanchett. I work at the Vatican Department of Foreign Affairs."

"Hmph, the Department of Foreign Affairs, eh? So you're Father Nightroad's colleague? That's a lot of hard work. I sympathize," said Astharoshe.

"Y-yes," Esther stammered, unsure of how to respond to the Marquise's mischievous smile. Esther felt a strange sense of indignation toward her companion's sympathy.

Paying no mind to Esther's ambivalence, Aste finished pouring hot water on her body and sank into the opposite side of the bathtub. Her every movement was exceptionally controlled; the water's surface barely rippled.

Esther heaved a silent sigh at the mesmerizing sight. The Marquise of Kiev was the most beautiful woman of her kind that Esther had seen so far.

Astharoshe's frame, taller than that of most men's, was curvy in all the right places — to the point that fellow females, including Esther, were hard pressed not to look. Whether it was due to immodesty or a certain naivety, the Marquise didn't blush a bit when exposing her magnificent naked body.

As she studied Astharoshe's body, which didn't have a blemish on it, Esther grew ashamed of her own body, which she considered far inferior. Because she wasn't raised in a well-to-do environment and was often placed in harm's way, new and old scars marked her skin like cruel seals.

All of a sudden, Astharoshe spoke, as if she'd read Esther's mind. "That's a strange wound," said the Marquise.

When Esther glanced up, the white-haired Methuselah was peering at the girl's face as if fascinated.

"The shape is strange, too, and it's very large. Was your stomach wounded in battle? Pretty amazing for a Terran to survive a wound like that," Astharoshe commented.

"Eh?" Esther shrugged, unconsciously looking down at her own body and covering the large birthmark on her side with her hand. "Ah, this is different. It isn't a wound, it's a birthmark."

"Birthmark?" Astharoshe asked as she wrapped her head in a towel so it wouldn't get wet. With curious eyes, she continued, "It's an interesting birthmark. It's shaped like a beautiful star. Now that I think about it, doesn't your name mean *star* in Terran language? Is that why your mother named you that?"

"Who knows?" Esther replied.

Esther didn't even know her mother's name, much less what her mother looked like. Her father, Edward Blanchett, had left her as a baby in the Saint Marcarius Church in Istvan,

and disappeared. Except for the rosary placed inside her diaper, the only memento Esther had received from her parents was her name, which did, in fact, mean *star* in ancient tongue.

No, *no! I'm too busy for that now!* Esther told herself in effort to assuage her hurt feelings. Now was no time to indulge in that sort of thing. Shaking her head once, she tried to redirect her thoughts to the present.

"Your Excellency the Marquise, may I ask you one thing?" Esther asked.

"What?" asked Astharoshe.

Since Esther had arrived at the mansion, there had been one thing nagging at her the entire time. It was difficult asking the Methuselah, who seemed to be at the peak of relaxation with both arms on the edges of the bathtub and her glistening eyes staring at the ceiling.

"Why did you help us?" Esther blurted out. "Why did you get involved? Do you have some relationship with Father Nightroad? How do you know him?"

"Oh, that?" asked Astharoshe. She casually flicked water droplets out of her hair with her long fingers. "I'm old friends with him. About three years ago, I went to the Outer to perform a certain Imperial decree. He helped me when I was unfamiliar with my whereabouts."

"So you helped us this time to repay a debt?" asked Esther.

"You mean a debt from me to him?" asked Astharoshe. At first, the Marquise of Kiev was floored, but then she was simply angry. "Debt? How rude! Even if he had loaned me something, there would be no debt. Don't say such a rude thing again, Esther!"

"Sorry!" said Esther, wondering what in the world the priest had done.

Aste brandished her fist, causing Esther to involuntarily duck her head.

"Yes, he certainly was of use to me three years ago, I'll acknowledge that. But immediately afterward, he sent me something absurd," Astharoshe recounted.

"Absurd?" Esther repeated timidly. "What did he send Your Excellency?"

"Children! And not one or two. He sent me a freighter full of children!" said Astharoshe. The beautiful woman appeared as fierce as if the priest were standing before her eyes. Hot water rippled atop the water's surface when she struck it with her fist. "Can you believe it? A boat full of living children! And they weren't meant to be pets. I was at my wits' end! However, when I listened to their story, I realized they had fallen on terribly bad luck. Because of that, I've made a considerable effort to arrange for them to earn their keep somehow. Really, I hate people's goodness!"

"Yeah?" said Esther. She was completely puzzled as to how she should chime in; but in the end, she decided to make an unrelated comment. "Let's see... so... Your Excellency must have had some reason for helping us. If this rescue effort isn't related to Father Nightroad, then what prompted it?"

Either because she had a frank disposition, or simply a fickle nature, Aste acted as though she'd forgotten all about being angry. "Oh, that," said Astharoshe, lowering her voice as if she were burnt out. "There *is* one thing I don't understand. Yesterday, Her Majesty granted me an Imperial decree: 'Protect the envoy who is coming soon from the Vatican.'"

"Her Majesty the Empress?" asked Esther, cocking her head as if intrigued. "Isn't that a bit strange? That means Her Majesty the Empress knew ahead of time that we'd be embroiled in a disaster. Right?" asked Esther.

"Maybe," said Astharoshe. Still submerged in the bathtub, the Marquise of Kiev narrowed her amber eyes. "But it's not that strange. Her Majesty is a special person. She can see through everything in the Empire and isn't necessarily a person we can understand. Perhaps she predicted the incident in which you were all involved."

"Yes," Esther replied.

The Empress was also greatly relied upon. Esther felt a bit strange when she remembered that the Count of Memphis also revered their ruler. At any rate, in the Empire, "Her Majesty" seemed to be equal to a demigoddess.

Eight hundred years ago, the legendary person who founded the Empire led the escape of the Methuselahs, who'd been exterminated from the sphere of civilization. Empress Vladika, the absolute ruler of the Empire, revived the land, which had been polluted by Armageddon to the extent that grass wouldn't grow, and warded off numerous attacks by humans. However, her true nature was a complete mystery.

The Empress normally dwelt deep within the private area called the Inner Court, and rarely revealed herself to her people. To maintain her privacy, the area around the throne was always wrapped in a thick veil, leaving no chance for even the nobility to see her face. In the Vatican, her existence was known as "Empress Symbol Theory."

"About how old is Her Majesty the Empress?" asked Esther. She was worried that it was impious to ask such a question, but overcome by curiosity, she let the question blurt out anyway. "This nation was founded about eight hundred years ago, right? So Her Majesty is at least eight hundred years old. I know Your Excellencies have lived very long lives, but too much —"

"Yes, we live a long time, but the longest lifespan is about three hundred years. We couldn't possibly reach the age she's achieved," said Astharoshe. By some miracle, she didn't become annoyed, despite the question's boldness. "But I did tell you that she is special. She is the future, eternal, and only Empress of we Methuselahs—the person who was our mother. She was there in the past, is here in the present, and will be there in the future, so that our Empire will continue forever."

A smile stretched across the Marquise of Kiev's pink-tinged cheeks for the first time. As soon as her warm body emerged from the bathtub, she kindly informed the girl, whose head was beginning to get dizzy from too much heat, "If it is Her Majesty's Imperial decree, I will risk my life to protect all of you. Come, you should get out now, too, Terran girl. A rank uniform has been prepared. You should eat once you've changed."

"Ho-ha-he-re-ha-fu-ha, hooo, heee, heee, haaaa, he-hei-ho-fu-ho-ho-ha," said Abel.

With a cruel stare, the Marquise of Kiev sent daggers in the direction of her guest, who resembled a snake trying to eat an egg whole as he mumbled while eating. "Finish what's in your mouth first, Father," suggested Astharoshe. "And after you do, you should try to speak in human tongue."

As soon as he gulped down the food crammed in his cheeks, the priest changed the subject to their forthcoming plans. Wearing an unusually serious expression, Abel blinked and said, "Scuse me. Look, I think we should start after we reconcile the unjust accusation against His Excellency the Count. As things stand, isn't His Excellency the main suspect in the crime against his ancestor? If we don't clear him of false charges, we won't be able to meet with Her Majesty the Empress."

Listening to Abel speak in a rare forthright manner, Esther agreed with a deep sigh. "It's true. As things are, we can't even go outside, let alone the Imperial Palace."

In the Marquise of Kiev's private room stood a table where, until minutes before, a magnificent spread of food had been served. Now the food was all but gone. Seated on a cushion, Aste drank red Aqua Vitae, and Esther, who wasn't used to Imperial cuisine,

snacked on a small amount of sponge cake with yogurt on it. Ion was downcast, with circles under his eyes, and didn't even drink the water. The majority of the meal ended up disappearing into only one stomach.

"Your Excellency the Count, please eat just a little," Esther urged.

She had stealthily hidden a small plate of baklava from the priest, who searched the table as if he were a demon hunting for a soul.

Observing the boy noble's gloomy countenance, Esther remarked, "And your face .. You didn't sleep well, did you?"

"No," said Ion in a thin voice.

It made sense. Only a few hours ago, Ion had lost his grandmother, his home had been burned down, and he'd even been accused of killing his grandmother. How could he possibly eat? When he considered the trials he'd endured, even Ion knew that if he didn't recover his physical strength just a little, his body wouldn't last, regardless of his being a Methuselah.

"If it's too hard to eat, how about something to drink — or some fruit?" said Esther. "If you don't nourish yourself properly, you won't last in an emergency."

Aste laughed lightly as she heard what Esther said. "She's right, Count of Memphis," said Astharoshe. Extending a graceful hand, she offered Ion a small plate of well-ripened pomegranate. "Even we get tired and hungry. If you can't sleep, you should at least eat sufficiently."

"I don't want any," said Ion, shaking his head. "Leave me alone about that, Marquise of Kiev. It isn't any of your business."

"None of my business?" repeated Astharoshe. Her amber eyes narrowed beneath her blood red hair. She looked like a wounded tiger. "Don't be impudent, you brat!"

"M-Marquise of Kiev! "Esther exclaimed.

Aste's slender hand extended like a whip and grabbed Ion by the throat. Ignoring the pleading girl, the beautiful woman lifted the unresisting boy to eye level, twisting her lips into a hateful expression. "You weren't saved because I liked you. I saved you because of an Imperial decree. Personally, Astharoshe Asran doesn't care at all if you fall dead in a field, or die in a dungeon!"

Struck silent by the violent words, Ion barely glanced up. He opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something, but he couldn't. One transparent drop of water leaked from his tightly closed eyelids.

"Hmph!" Aste glared disgustedly at Ion's tear of regret, but proceeded to dump the boy on the sofa as if throwing away something filthy. "For somebody who calls himself an Imperial noble to cry in front of people — in front of Terrans! — is cowardly. What kind of grandson did the Duchess of Moldova raise, anyway?"

The instant his grandmother's name was mentioned, Ion's manner changed.

Standing up indignantly and baring his fangs, he shouted, "Don't insult my grandmother! If you insult my grandmother further . . . Marquise of Kiev, I won't forgive you!"

"You still have enough willpower to get angry, do you?" asked Astharoshe, showing no sign of being moved as she watched the enraged young man.

Esther, who'd been nervously watching the two of them quarrel, tried to interrupt with a hand gesture, but Aste stopped her and said icily, "Hadh't you better attend to your own body before getting angry at me? And have you considered the feelings of the girl next to you who is full of worry? Such a pitiful sight. You should think about what your grandmother would say if she saw you."

Shame caused the boy's face, which was previously pale with anger, to go crimson. His shoulders shook as he held his head in his hands. "You're right, Marquise of Kiev," said Ion. "I won't grieve any longer."

"You said it. Now prove it with your actions from now on," said Astharoshe, quickly turning her back as though she'd lost interest in the boy.

As proof that she hadn't become completely sidetracked, she took back a plate of food from the priest, who'd been absentmindedly eating throughout the argument, and, ignoring his bitter protest, placed it before Ion.

"Eat and get your strength back. You'll be a nuisance if you hinder us," said Astharoshe.

"I will accept it gratefully," said Ion.

Bowing his head slightly, Ion picked up a spoon. He began to shovel food into his mouth as if it were a despised enemy.

Patting down her chest in relief, Esther glanced up at the Marquise of Kiev, but the tall Methuselah had returned to her own seat. As the Marquise continued to drink her Aqua Vitae, she revisited the topic in an extremely businesslike way. "Let's go back to talking about what comes next. I think we've already heard from the priest, but Astharoshe Asran has a prudent temperament."

"I don't know this Astharoshe Asran that Aste keeps talking about," said Abel, "but if you have some clue, can I ask – Owwww!"

After silencing the priest with a backhand to his nose, Aste turned to the remaining two. "Even I, being prudent, can only think of one plan to break the deadlock of this dreadful situation you're all in. It will be considerably risky, but I suggest you directly appeal to the Diwan."

"Diwan?" said Ion. Hearing the word made his face light up for the first time. He leaned forward as though he'd discovered a magical light in the dead of night. "Will the Diwan be convened, Marquise of Kiev? When?"

"A notice was released a little while ago, saying that it would be urgently convened in the Celestial Imperial Palace after six o'clock. Presumably, there will be a notification about the Duchess of Moldova's death. No matter what you might say, the highest official in the Empire is dead," said Astharoshe.

Esther was self-conscious about butting into the conversation, but she timidly raised one hand. "Excuse me, what is that Diwan?" she asked. "Is it some kind of meeting?"

"It is. However, it's the highest meeting. Her Majesty the Empress attends," Astharoshe explained. Combing back the blood red hair that hung over her face, Aste grinned. "We're Imperial nobles, but we can't easily get in to see Her Majesty the Empress. Those who aren't Imperial Guards or State Secrets Institute-class statesmen are rarely allowed inside Her Majesty's Inner Court, the Imperial Palace. But if it's a Diwan –"

"So it's an ideal chance," said Ion. His expression still wasn't cheerful as he listened to the beautiful woman's explanation, but life was coming back into his eyes. He readjusted his collar and turned back in Aste's direction as if an entirely different. "As you say, it seems there's no chance of a sudden reversal if we allow this chance to escape. Marquise of Kiev, can I rely on you?"

"Leave it to me," said Astharoshe. "I'll get you in to see Her Majesty without fail, and will report the facts of the matter to the throne. This has become fairly interesting, hasn't it?"

Esther began to sense an ill-fated premonition behind the woman's smile.

Having finally finished stuffing tissue paper into his nose, Abel raised his hand and asked, "Can I come, too? I'm certain private citizens can also attend a Diwan, right? Can't I go with you as Aste's private secretary?"

"You, Father?" asked Astharoshe, her mouth half open. Her face gradually tightening into a vengeful scowl, she continued, "Private citizens are allowed to attend, but you happened to be present at the scene of the Duchess of Moldova's assassination. If you're discovered, won't it be a bit awkward?"

"It'll be fine, because I'll go with my face hidden. Besides, even if Aste petitions for a private audience with Her Majesty the Empress, there are no witnesses or evidence, so you won't get permission so easily, will you? Her Majesty doesn't have a lot of spare time, does she?" asked Abel.

"That's true, but.. ."Aste still appeared hesitant, or she simply didn't want to take this man out with her in public. The quality of their private citizens was one of the essential parameters by which the family traditions and status of the noble who was their master were measured. Her gaze wandered indecisively as she fingered through her white hair. "When you say proof, what have you got, Father? Isn't it meaningless if you can't prove your status or true identity?"

It seemed as though Astharoshe were trying to find some reason to reject the plan, but Abel smiled with satisfaction, as if he'd anticipated her question.

"I have proof! Esther, please loan me Caterina's letter," said Abel.

"Ah, yes!" said Esther.

Abel quickly took the document Esther handed him and thrust it in front of Aste's face, flaring his nose proudly. "This is a private letter from the Duchess of Milan to Her Majesty the Empress. With this, I will accompany Aste. And when I get in to see Her Majesty the Empress, I will explain the circumstances directly. How's that?"

"Hmmm," said Astharoshe.

It was a strange plan showing good sense. Aste moved her lips as if still trying to refute it, but unable to devise an effective debate against it, she clicked her tongue. "Very well. Although it is indeed a rare thing, what you say is correct. I'll let you go with me as my citizen. It's still strange...."

"What is?" asked Abel.

"For some reason, I've had the irresistible urge to wring your neck for quite some time now," said Astharoshe.

"Hmmm, maybe that's a serious problem rooted in your character development from childhood. Or a calcium deficiency?" said Abel.

Esther pleaded with the woman, who'd begun to slowly strangle the priest to death. "Ah, um, Your Excellency the Marquise, please let me go, too!"

Esther didn't know why she'd come to this remote foreign country if she was going to be left behind like this. She looked up imploringly at Aste's tall body. "If Father Nightroad can go, naturally I can go too, right? I'm the Duchess of Milan's messenger, and two witnesses are better than one."

"I'm sorry, but that's impossible, Terran girl," Astharoshe replied.

Throwing the priest, with his bruised face and wildly kicking feet, to the side, Aste shook her head in a conflicted manner. In a gentle but firm tone, she said, "I can't take you into the Celestial Imperial Palace. You should wait for news here with Count of Memphis."

"Wh-why?" asked Esther. "As an envoy, I — "

"The answer to that is simple, Esther," said Abel once he managed to stand. Rubbing his neck, which had finger marks on it, he explained to the tearful girl, "You can't speak the language here, can you? No matter what you say, you can't enter the Imperial court. If you aren't at least fluent in the language, it will be off-putting."

"Oh," said Esther. Knowing what Abel said was true, Esther was at a loss for words.

It wasn't that she had no talent for studying languages. Far from it, in fact. Besides Hungarian, which was her mother tongue, she was equally fluent in Roman common tongue, Latin, and Albionese, which was her father's language. She'd also achieved a conversational level of speech in five other languages, starting with Carthaginian. And at the training ground, she'd received an A rank in languages. Unfortunately, only Imperial language was completely unfamiliar to her.

During the three months since being chosen as an envoy, she'd been assiduously taught by Ion and had managed to speak single words, but that was far from the level of a native speaker. It would be the end if she ever had to speak to somebody in the Imperial court.

Still refusing to accept the answer, Esther tried to argue. "M-maybe it really is as Father says, but . . . but, if you're going to say that, aren't you the same, Father? If so, I'm still better if I can speak one word."

"Hey, who did you say can't speak Imperial language? How rude," said Abel in Imperial tongue.

Esther's jaw dropped. "Huh?" she said, staring aghast at the priest who suddenly began to speak in an unknown language, using perfect grammar and pronunciation.

"You can speak the language here, Father?" she asked.

"Yes, although it would be a problem if I were asked to write a thesis or give a speech," Abel joked, chuckling proudly. Pushing up the bridge of his glasses, he continued boastfully, "I'm confident enough to believe I won't be suspected if I pretend to be a citizen. There's no mistake that I'm far more natural than Esther."

"But, if so, why haven't you said one word until now?" asked Esther.

"Well, hey, don't they say that in order to deceive your enemies, you have to first deceive your friends? Depending on where the enemy is, of course" said Abel.

The priest threw back his head as if he ruled the world. Wriggling his nose, he chided, "If you're staying here and not working, Caterina is going to give you a pretty hard time when you return home. Go ahead, do your best work!"

"Being scolded for not working? But I'm the same!" cried Esther.

"I know that. However, palace service is the path of bloodshed. Won't you please serve as a sacrificed pawn here? In a supporting role, for indispensable me?" Abel asked.

The priest patted Esther's shoulders, gazing somewhere in the distance. Esther's fists trembled violently.

"Ahhh, I'll never forget your noble sacrifice," said Abel. "When you manage to return to Rome, you should tender an application for sainthood. Doesn't 'Saint Esther' have a nice ring?"

II

The Imperial capital was divided across the Bosphorus Channel into the territories of the western coast's European side and the eastern coast's Asia-Indian side. However, most of the Methuselahs lived on the European side. The west coast district was further divided into north and south by the Halic, which cut deeply inland like a river.

The city area of the west coast district's north division, which rested atop a rather steep-sloped peak rising from the shores of the Halic, was a high-class residential area where the Methuselah nobles' mansions stood in rows. It was here where the infrastructure was concentrated. It consisted primarily of public water, underground power facilities, and the majority of military facilities, including training grounds and naval ports.

The entirety of the south division, a wide area enclosed by seven hills and abundant forests, was the private domain of only one person. Its actual size was forty times that of San Pietro, which was said to be the largest palace in human society. The site had thirteen large domes and close to a hundred spires, and was inhabited by a hundred Palace Guards, a few hundred Methuselah nobles, close to ten thousand Terran citizens, and countless automata, who all spent their daily lives there, serving one mistress.

The master of the Empire, the central authority, had erected a series of tiled roofs within the broad territory. From the perfectly controlled factories that operated silently underground, nearly all of the essential goods for daily life were supplied. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the existence of this lot, where complete self-sufficiency was possible, had achieved nation status.

The Celestial Imperial Palace was the heart of the Empire, in every possible way. And it was the residence of the sole and eternal ruler of the New Human Empire, Empress Vladika.

Even the *boyar* already seated, numbered no fewer than five hundred. When counting the private citizens who stood behind them and the waiters serving tea to them, close to three thousand people were gathered in this space.

The Diwan Human extended below the huge dome, which seemed to brush Heaven. In it remained one conspicuously empty space. Cushions embroidered with the family crests and colors of each nobleman covered the attendees' seats, and made it appear as though the autumn sky had fallen into that very room.

"Wowee, look at all these people! When you said 'meeting,' I thought it would be a snug place with seven or eight people at the most!" said Abel.

"Idiot. My underling and I couldn't attend such a place, could we? Never mind that, lower your voice. You're calling yourself my private citizen. Citizens don't shame their masters," Astharoshe hissed, sharply rebuking the young man, who spoke fluent, but remedial Imperial language.

A high-class smile was fixed upon Abel's slightly made-up face. The pair advanced through the corridor as they returned elegant nods to Aste's acquaintances greeting her as she passed.

From the State Secrets officials who were class-one bureaucrats, to the class-nine bureaucrats in miscellaneous posts, the nobles seated around the Imperial throne were situated in a folding-fan shape according to rank. The employment rank of Directly Reporting Chief Inspector, a post that dealt with nobles' misdeeds, was class seven. On the third tier from the edge, Aste's tall chair was prepared.

Aste finally sat down on the cushion decorated with the Asran family crest—"Virgin Carrying Spear"—and her own signature, and ordered a waiter who quickly approached. "I'll have warm milk," requested Astharoshe. "Slightly warm. Violet honey will be fine. Will you have anything to drink?"

"Tea—with thirteen sugars, please. By the way, Aste, which one is the Empress?" asked Abel. As he watched the waiter leave with their orders, the gangly citizen standing behind the Marquise of Kiev whispered quietly, "And where is the throne?"

"Idiot, can't you see Her Majesty?" Aste scolded the silver-haired young man who was looking around unabashedly.

If it were discovered that Astharoshe had brought an outsider into the Diwan, beheading was a given. She carefully scanned the eyes surrounding them. "The throne is behind that bamboo screen. Look, there. The place where the *Ienichieri* are lined up," she said, gesturing toward the screen.

Next to a wall stood a group wearing masks and enveloped in scarlet armor. They were Palace Guards, armed with electromagnetic flamethrowers that fired solid bullets or liquid explosives by magnetic - field effect, and broad sabers equipped with a high-frequency producing mechanism.

Aste jutted her chin toward the top of the stairs beyond where the guards stood unflinchingly. There hung a gossamer green curtain. Amid the nobles' blue uniforms, the citizens' black uniforms, and the monarch's guards' crimson armor, a sparkle of jade flickered elegantly. Jade was the precious color not to be used in the Empire by anybody except the Empress. There was no way to see inside the bamboo screen, but a few State Secrets officials—the cabinet ministers said to be the Empress's highest advisors—repeatedly glanced in its direction.

"Hey, so that's it? It does look expensive," said Abel.

"I'm begging you, Father. . ." said Astharoshe. Clenching her upset stomach, Aste turned toward the overly curious priest. "Won't you shut up?" she pleaded. "Do not cause a problem under any circumstances!"

"Don't you know me, Aste?" asked Abel.

"I'm worried *because!* know you. Anyway that's it. It would've been right to bring that Esther girl along. On the day I brought that girl along with you, I was in for trouble," said Astharoshe.

Aste grumbled as she pushed her palm against a slit in the tabletop. As the computer collated her social status based on her palm print and her cells' genetic information, she added gravely, "That girl is like I was a long time ago. I, too, felt exactly like that when I hadn't yet mellowed, personality-wise. If you leave her alone, might she get violent?"

"Well, her speech was challenged, so all we could do was leave her quietly in the mansion," said Abel.

Suddenly, a holograph solidified before Aste.

Peeking over Aste's shoulder at what the computer wrote with directional lasers, the priest nodded sagely. "Isn't she probably quarreling with Count of Memphis by now? She's worked very hard until this point, so don't you think we should at least let her rest a bit?"

"Ha! That's not all, is it, Father?" asked Astharoshe, grinning as she looked up from the daily agenda dictated by the holograph. "You don't want to make that girl cross a dangerous bridge, do you? Although you used her unfamiliarity with our language as an excuse, the truth is, you were actually unwilling to expose her to danger."

"Huh? What do you mean?" asked Abel.

"I'm saying your meddlesome nature is the same as always," said Astharoshe with a wily smile. "It's just like it was three years ago—"

Suddenly a familiar voice called from beside her. It wasn't the priest's apathetic voice, but a more powerful voice of a mature man. "It's been a long time, Lady Astharoshe," said Sulayman. "Has it been four years already? Do you remember my face?"

"Duke of Tigris!" said Astharoshe, her mouth stiffening. Staring at the smiling face gazing down at her, she stood up as though an electric current had passed through her.

"Excuse me, Your Excellency the Duke!" said Astharoshe.

"You can call me Sulayman, princess. Or 'Uncle,' as you did so long ago," Sulayman replied. The man had the stature of a magnificent hero as he smiled wryly at the Marquise of Kiev, who was stiff and formal. His true age had to be close to three hundred years, but his outward appearance retained the youthfulness of his late thirties. Distinguished looking, he was a head taller than Abel; and because his muscles were compact, he lacked the oafish characteristics of ordinary large men. Based solely on his kind smile, soft demeanor, and

gentle outward appearance, it was difficult to fathom that he was a member of distinguished military services vying for first or second ranking in the Empire.

Sulayman, Duke of Tigris, was the Second Privy Counselor and so-called Vice Prime Minister. The great lord among lords who had supported the Empire's body politic for a few dozen years, addressed Aste encouragingly. "Please don't be so formal, princess, simply because it's been such a long time. I'm sorry I was unable to pay my condolences when your mother died last year," said Baybars.

"N-no, Duke of Tig—Uncle—you have nothing to apologize for, because you'd been appointed hard work. I was rude for not visiting often," said Astharoshe.

With a courteous smile, Sulayman studied the Marquise of Kiev's discomfort, but his gaze moved to the citizen behind her and grew suspicious. "Princess, today your citizen is different than normal? What happened to old Chadarli? He can't have — "

"No, the old man is fine. It's just that today he had some business he had to settle, so he couldn't come. This is a person named Abel, who recently joined our family. Oh, dear, because he's clumsy, and a terribly careless person, my fingers are getting burnt," said Astharoshe.

Abel raised his eyebrows. "Ah, terrible. When am I care — "

Silencing her protesting citizen with a blow to the pit of his stomach, Aste managed a strained smile. "As you can see, he's just come from the country. I truly am ashamed."

"No, no," said Sulayman.

The Duke, who was a distant relation to the Marquise of Kiev's family, watched over the girl contentedly, but his expression changed as he lowered his voice. "Oh, yes. Princess, do you know today's agenda?"

"Information about the Duchess of Moldova's death. I've read it, but . . ." said Astharoshe, trailing off.

The Duchess of Moldova's death hadn't been formally announced, but it was already common knowledge. It was also widely known that her death wasn't natural and that her grandson had killed her. Nearly all the conversation ensuing in the meeting hall was surely being monopolized by the topic.

"I overheard a worrying rumor that she was killed by her grandson, Count of Memphis. Because it's merely a rumor, I won't say anything," Astharoshe assured the Duke.

"The facts are as you've stated them, princess. The only problem is — " said Sulayman.

"Problem?" Astharoshe interrupted.

Sulayman seemed hesitant to answer Aste. He stood, frozen in thought, as if a classical statue; however, after a moment, the great nobleman drew a long breath.

"This is only a rumor, of course, but they say two people were with Count of Memphis then—a man and a woman. They were supposedly two Terrans," said Sulayman.

"Two Terrans?" asked Astharoshe, cocking her head dubiously. "But there are Terrans everywhere in the Empire."

"Sure, there are Terrans everywhere in the Empire. They're even in this Celestial Imperial Palace. But they're probably not Terrans who can quote the Bible in Latin," said Sulayman.

"The Bible?" asked Astharoshe. Glaring out the corner of her eye at the man behind her who was gazing off into nothingness, Aste bit her lip and thought to herself, *This idiot*. . .

Terrans who could speak Outer languages weren't particularly rare in the Empire, because there were many opportunities to travel in the Outer for secret trade, information gathering, and so forth. Outer languages were even included in the curriculum for citizens' training course.

However, when it came to Terrans who could quote the Bible, it would be impossible to discover one if you scoured the entire Empire, because for some reason, all church activity was forbidden in the land. Imperial law forbade the *boyar* and Terrans alike from holding or propagating beliefs. If there were an eccentric bunch of "Terrans who could quote the Bible in Latin" they must be limited to Outer people and Vatican agents.

With no means of knowing what was happening in the thoughtful lady's heart, Sulayman shook his head gravely. "This might turn out to be a serious situation. If the Outer, and furthermore the Vatican, are involved, the Duchess of Moldova's death is no ordinary death."

Sulayman was known among the nobles to be particularly Terran-loving. Even if he were no match for the "Terran-lover" Marquise of Kiev, Aste had to tip her hat to his profound opinions about the Outer. Eighty years ago, when he'd been appointed Governor of Misr after expertly suppressing the plague that had spread among Terrans, he was revered like a god. From his point of view, this incident was a situation worthy of his concern.

Sulayman grew increasingly melancholy. "However, Her Majesty's judges will decide everything, but if the Outer is involved in the matter, you might be consulted, princess. No matter what you say, you have the most experience with the Outer. Is your heart prepared?" he asked.

"No ... I ..." said Astharoshe.

Aste waved her hand hastily, but Sulayman kept smiling compassionately. He was going to say something encouraging to her, but suddenly cocked his head as if called by somebody. "It seems we're starting," said Sulayman.

Faint signs of stress were noticeable in the State Secrets official as he peered through the green bamboo curtain. In fact, everyone there appeared to be on edge. The continuous hum dwindled to silence as if the tide had come and gone, and people walking along the corridor hurriedly returned to their seats. One after the other, holograms began to float up from the seats of the inner circle, those of the second and third rank officials. It seemed this Diwan had also summoned the city commanders and governor-class senior officials of the local towns.

"Well, Marquise of Kiev, I must go now," said Sulayman, leaving Aste's side. But as he was leaving, he suddenly turned around as if he'd remembered something, and whispered, "If it's all right, may I have a bit of your time soon? I'd like to ask your opinions about the Outer."

"Yes, gladly," replied Astharoshe.

Beaming at the Marquise, who was still maintaining the utmost reserve, the great man turned on his heel again and returned to the front row. Aste saluted again and took her seat when the bell in the front of the meeting hall rang loudly.

One of the State Secrets officials who stood up raised his voice to make the announcement.

"The New Human Empire's eternal ruler, the mother of all we Methuselahs." Bowing his head respectfully toward the stairs, he said, "Her Majesty the Empress has arrived!"

The veil fluttered.

The attendees rose simultaneously and bowed their heads, imitating the five State Secrets officials who stood up in the front row, when a slim shadow took a seat beyond the veil.

A computerized voice accompanied by an oppressive drone rang down from above the attending nobles' heads.

<An assembly is troublesome, my lovely children of the night. >

The voice, which echoed from the great dome, was articulate, but its tone was altered to sound as if countless people, young and old, male and female,, were talking all at once. It was impossible to guess the speaker's emotions, let alone her age.

But this time, the Empress of the New Human Empire, Augusta Vladika, seemed to heave a faint sigh.

<I think you already know, but twelve hours ago, our Chief Privy Counselor Mirka Fortuna, Duchess of Moldova died. I mourn the fact that her graceful wings, the strongest pillar in the Empire, have left us. I will personally conduct her memorial service five days from now. Duke of Tigris?>

The Empress called quietly to the Second Privy Counselor, who stood up with his right hand on his heart.

"Yes!" said Sulayman.

<I leave the practical business to you, Sulayman. Perform it so that nothing is omitted. >

"With pleasure," said Sulayman.

The tall Methuselah bowed deeply, but his anxiety was obvious. Now that the Chief Privy Counselor was dead, he who was in the post of Second Privy Counselor was the first on the list of important retainers. To be told that the details of the Duchess of Moldova's funeral were his responsibility was proof of the Empress's trust.

<Various duties will be allotted to others as well. Assist Duke of Tigris, and manage it as you see fit. Well, everyone, although it's a pity, I must now inform you of a very disturbing thing. >

The modulated voice disguised the identity of the Empress, but a hint of her emotions grew more and more detectable as she spoke.

<The death of the Duchess of Moldova was not natural. My daughter was killed by a sword wielded by another. Concerning that point, there is a report from the Chief of our Palace Guards, Baron of Khartoum, at the front. >

A conspicuously large shadow advanced from the line of Palace Guards. With eyes gleaming like burning lava, Baybars, Baron of Khartoum, bowed toward the throne. "Yes, as Her Majesty just said, the Duchess of Moldova was killed. And the one who killed her was her grandson, Ion Fortuna, Count of Memphis."

A tense atmosphere and expressions that seemed to scream, "I thought so!" filled the hall. One person leaned forward as if waiting to hear more; another person drooped his head and sank into the sofa. But everyone looked troubled.

Taking in the stifled atmosphere, the black Methuselah continued his report in a sonorous voice. "Four months ago, Ion Fortuna was given an Imperial decree and went to the Outer. However, he returned secretly to the Empire yesterday and seems to have gone to the Duchess of Moldova's mansion and caused violence. Further, in the report from the Heraklion Capital Guards Department, four days ago, Count of Memphis and his citizen requisitioned the Heraklion's deep-sea assault vessel *Nereides*. And ten hours ago, in the suburbs of the Imperial capital, wreckage that appears to match the same ship was found; it is currently under investigation. For details, scan the materials you have on hand."

As if responding to Baybars' words, laser-written letters floated above many of the nobles' desks.

"Twelve hours ago, I was entrusted with an Imperial decree, and went to the mansion to see the Duchess of Moldova privately. But when I arrived there, the mansion was already on fire, and there was nothing anyone could do. At that time, we discovered Count of Memphis and his two Terran companions. I demanded to hear their explanation, but the

three of them denied the request, and after they resisted, they managed to escape. Those are the circumstances of the matter," explained Baybars.

A report presented by the Palace Guards was displayed after the full report about the shipwreck. Pointing at it, Baybars concluded his report. "It isn't mentioned in the report, but all of the Palace Guards including me heard Count of Memphis and the two Terrans traveling with him conversing in what seemed to be Outer language. The probability is extremely high that they are Outer agents from the Vatican. I propose that we capture the three of them quickly, and make them explain the details."

After the Chief of the Palace Guards bowed toward the throne, he returned to the ranks. His towering figure was like a living statue of a war god. To a person any bit inferior, Baybars probably would've passed for the god of plague himself.

An annoying voice addressed Aste as she scanned the document, still grimacing. Standing behind her, Abel whispered, "This is a bit dire, isn't it, Aste? Never mind Count of Memphis and we asking to see Her Majesty the Empress. We'll be killed as soon as we're seen, won't we? Marquise of Kiev, use your influence here somehow."

Still grumbling, Aste raised her hand. "I know, leave it to me. You really are a frivolous fellow, though."

In reality, speaking in front of people wasn't Astharoshe's forte, but now it didn't matter. Preparing herself, she sought to speak. "Wait . . ."

"Wait, I object!" said Sulayman.

In that instant, Aste lost her chance to execute her resolution because a voice filled with more strength and intelligence interrupted her".

The most important retainer in the Empire stood up in the front row. The voice of Sulayman, Duke of Tigris, was quiet, but its substance and certainty didn't waver. "Baron of Khartoum, I have grave doubts about what you say. Count of Memphis was at the location of the Duchess of Moldova's death, but that doesn't automatically warrant him being a suspect. How can you decide that the Duchess of Moldova's murder is her grandson's crime at this point in time, without any evidence?"

The attendees listened intently to the Second Privy Counselor's words. There wasn't so much as one cough heard in the meeting hall as Sulayman exercised his power of persuasion.

"Secondly, regarding the *Nereides*, you've accused Count of Memphis of this crime without any evidence, too. The connection between the Count requisitioning it on his Imperial envoy's authority, and the disaster of the same ship, is a matter that should be resolved following an accurate investigation. I'm afraid that conjecture at this point in time should be dismissed as presumptuous slander. Coming to a conclusion based on hearsay and speculation only invites undesirable results. Baron, I'd like to ask you to speak cautiously," said Sulayman.

"Duke of Tigris, are you saying that Count of Memphis is innocent?" asked a young, arresting woman with her waist-length black hair bound up high. She glanced toward Baybars who'd opened his mouth as if he'd wanted to make a counterargument. The Third Privy Counselor Marquise of Damascus, Feron Lin tilted her elongated eyes upward and cast a meaningful glance to the Duke of Tigris, who was still standing. "Because Count of Memphis returned to the Empire secretly, without visiting the palace for a greeting when he returned, it caused an incident. Doesn't it seem as though he is rebellious in nature?"

"Regarding the notion that Count of Memphis secretly returned to the Empire, I'm not suggesting it isn't suspicious. I'm merely saying that it may be unjust to accuse him of treason based on that one fact," said Sulayman.

After he took a breath, Sulayman sipped his tea. His eyes, full, of quiet but spiritual strength stared at his brethren. "Assembled lords, the problem has to do with high treason. If you say you'll prosecute the young man as a traitor in the future, certain proof must be supplied. So long as that is not provided, it is unfair to inquire about the Count of Memphis's guilt. Lords, what do you think?"

"Unfortunately, Duke of Tigris, there is proof of Count of Memphis's treason," a young man interjected in an oddly thin voice. Despite his lack of vocal brawn, the man commanded the attendees' attention. "I myself am proof of that. He ran to the Terrans who call themselves the Vatican, and tried to sell his mother country to them. He wounded me when I tried to stop him, and vanished. I hereby accuse Ion Fortuna, Count of Memphis, of attempting to sell out his country."

"You?" Sulayman gasped, his eyes open wide in shock.

The blue-haired Methuselah narrowed his bronze eyes and bowed to Sulayman. "Radu Barvon, Baron of Luxor. I have just returned home."

III

Ion tried reading the map spread on the stone pavement with up and down reversed, but couldn't make heads or tails of it. Next, he tried reversing it left to right. It was still incomprehensible.

"To tell you the truth, this is the first time I've come to the Terran district," he confessed to his companion.

Ion had fled the Marquise of Kiev's mansion, practically kidnapping the girl who stood by his side. He couldn't help but speak in an apologetic tone. "I didn't think it would be such a different environment. It's actually quite mysterious."

"This seems more normal to me," said the red-haired girl squatting next to him. Esther stroked the curb as she tried to explain her impressions, perhaps out of consideration so as not to embarrass her companion, who'd gotten them completely lost while talking big. "Of course, day and night are reversed, but except for that, it isn't really that different from Rome. At least, it's much easier to understand than the west coast area."

Esther returned her gaze to the network of streets. There were large and small shops whose eaves lined the street on the left and right, and endless crowds that were never seen from the opposite shore of the channel, the nobles' district on the west coast. The hallmark of an old downtown section, small buildings were densely packed together, and the long streets and narrow alleys that stretched like a honeycomb between them were filled with frenetic activity. Beneath the streetlights that hung like bells from the ceilings, the rows of shops overflowing with goods were a magnificent sight.

"There are people and things, and it's busy. Somehow, it isn't at all different from the Outer," said Esther.

"Maybe. But it does have some differences from the Outer. Have you noticed?" asked Ion.

"Hmmm, differences? There aren't any alcohol vendors?" asked Esther.

In the Imperial capital, there were shops that sold general goods and such, but there were things missing among them that existed in the Outer. For example, there were no shops selling alcoholic beverages, nor were there any tobacconists. The reason was because these luxury goods, which had a danger of harming Terran health, were considered contraband in the Empire, and their sale was strictly prohibited. The capital was full of public baths and teahouses instead of bars.

"Alcohol? Yeah. But there are others. For example, this building behind us," said Ion.

"Eh? This?" asked Esther. She looked up suspiciously at the building. There was no way to see if there were any lights on in it, but it had a clean and tidy facade. The faint scent of alcohol wafted from it.

"A hospital?" asked Esther.

"Close, but wrong. This building is a blood extraction office. It's a place to collect blood, which is the raw material for the Aqua Vitae we dose ourselves with," said Ion.

"Blood?" said Esther with a slight tremor. She must have known that the Aqua Vitae she'd seen Ion and other Methuselabs frequently drinking was to suppress chronic anemia, and that it was made from Terrans' blood. But she was probably surprised to hear that they drained that blood from Terrans. Somewhat apprehensive, she stood up hurriedly.

"It goes without saying, we don't extract blood by force," said Ion. Cognizant of her fear, he added rather hurriedly, "Blood extraction is always the Terrans' free will. However, because we exchange a considerable amount of money for it, it's a valuable source of revenue for low-income slaves. To put it in your words, it's a 'welfare policy.' That way, the Imperial government can support the lives of poor slaves."

From Ion's point of view, each was compensating the other for its wants, so it seemed like a good deal, but there were probably certain points that a Terran like Esther didn't understand. With her cold eyes still turned toward the building, she backed up slightly.

"I suppose my explanation was bad," said Ion.

Ion sighed, giving up on trying to make Esther understand, and turned back to the map. More than two hours had passed since escaping the Marquise of Kiev's mansion without permission. If they didn't finish their business and return before the Marquise of Kiev came home from visiting the Celestial Imperial Palace, he didn't know what that bloodthirsty beauty might do to them. His face became serious as he studied the map.

"Let's see, first, we crossed the Bosphorus using the great bridge. So we entered the market from this street? From there, we went down this way, right at that corner . . ." said Ion.

Ion heard a voice clear as a bell while he grappled with the map. Naturally, the Imperial language didn't mean much to Esther.

"Hey, hey, brothers, don't you want some tea? It's delicious," said the voice. "Well? It's twenty *akuche* per cup, but I'll let you have two cups on special for thirty."

When Ion turned around, he saw one girl standing there. She seemed about two or three years younger than Esther. Beneath her short, black haircut, her pale face was white, nearly transparent. A brass pot hung from the belt she wore over her ash-colored clothes that indicated she was of the slave class. Small glasses full of ruby-colored liquid were lined up on a tray she held in one hand.

"We don't need any tea. We don't feel like it," said Ion, trying to shoo the girl away with a wave of his hand. "Leave at once, girl. I'm busy."

"Don't say that. Say, that girl there looks like she's thirsty?" said the girl.

It was rare for a slave to be so unafraid of a citizen.

She narrowed her green eyes shrewdly and began to poke at the arm of Ion's citizen's clothes. "Do the two of you have a date today? You suit each other!" said the girl. She followed her remark with a whistle.

"A date? Do we look like we're on a date?" asked Ion, pointing to himself and Esther.

"You're a very rude girl. So, how much is it?"

Contrary to his first reaction, Ion quickly took out some change. The amount the girl stated was more expensive than the market price, but he still offered three aluminum coins on his palm.

"I don't need change. You should be grateful and take it. By the way, girl, what area is this?" asked Ion, pointing on the map to the tea-seller while handing Esther her cup. Bathing his chin in the steam rising from the glass, he said, "We were looking for a pharmacy managed by the citizen Mimarl. How do we get there from here?"

"Mimarl's shop on the pharmacy street?" asked the girl. She put the aluminum coins in her apron with a scrupulous gesture and felt her sharp chin. "Yes, I know that one. If it's all right, shall I guide you there?"

"Really? That would help. Let's go, Esther. This girl says she'll guide us," said Ion.

It seemed as though their luck had turned for the first time tonight. Hurriedly finishing the tea, Ion urged Esther in Roman language, so the slave girl wouldn't understand: "Let's hurry. We have to return to the mansion before the Marquise of Kiev comes home."

Quickly supping her tea, Esther stood up. She returned the glass to the girl after politely wiping it with a handkerchief. "I know," said Esther, "but does the incident at the mansion really have anything to do with him?"

There was no spirit in Esther's voice. As she began to walk hesitantly after the boy, she timidly voiced her doubts. "Mimarl was very kind to us. Honestly, I don't want to believe that he had anything to do with this incident."

"And yet traitors betray," said Ion, casually cutting the girl off. *Yes, traitors betray*, he thought as he folded his map. Hadn't he had a sufficient taste of that in that desert town?

"The ones who attacked our mansion seemed to be waiting for our return. That man is the only one except for us three who knew the exact day and hour of my return home. Isn't that reason ¹ enough to suspect him?" asked Ion.

"That's true," said Esther, "But —"

"If you don't want to come with me, I don't want to force you," Ion candidly told the girl who seemed resistant. "I'm fine on my own now. Esther, you go back to the Marquise of Kiev's mansion."

"If Your Excellency is going, I will go, too. I can't leave Your Excellency alone," said Esther.

"Oh?" said Ion.

After the girl nodded dutifully, Ion looked away.

The girl who sold them tea had gone pretty far ahead. Before they knew it, the three of them had left the main street and entered one of the side streets. Although it was an alley, it was brightly illuminated like the Imperial capital, and it was swept so clean that there wasn't one particle of dust. The noise of the night began to thin with the crowds.

"So, girl. Are we at Mimarl's shop yet?" asked Ion.

"I'm using a shortcut. It's right ahead. By the way, it's become bothersome; so don't call me 'girl' all the time. I have a splendid name: Seth," said the girl.

"Seth?" asked Ion, smiling weakly.

The Empire was a nation of many races, and just like skin colors, there were many variations of names. But if Ion's common knowledge was correct, wasn't 'Seth' the name a Terran from the Dead Sea area gave to a son?

"Interesting. Did your father want a boy?" asked Ion.

"Who knows? I have two older brothers, so I think he must have had enough boys, but . . . Never mind that. Look, we've arrived," said Seth, jutting her chin boldly.

Before they knew it, the three of them had returned to a main street again. But compared to the main street they'd been on earlier, there was remarkably less foot traffic, and even the assortment of goods in the shops appeared far simpler. The unmistakable smell of medicine still wafted in the air.

"This is the pharmacy street. Mimarl's shop is the one on that corner," said Seth.

"I see," said Ion.

The girl puffed her chest proudly as Ion placed coins in her hand.

"Thank you very much, girl. You can go now," said Ion.

"Wow, check out how haughty this guy is," said Seth as she counted the aluminum coins in her hand. "Say, sister, isn't it a lot of work going out with a guy like this? Take my advice. You should choose your partner carefully."

"Don't butt in!" said Ion indignantly.

He wasn't interrupting because he was angry, however. It would be awful to let Esther speak, when she didn't know half a word of Imperial language. Waving his hands to shush her, he tried to chase off the girl, who appeared to have more to say. "She's still shy, having just come from the territories. Don't talk to her familiarly."

"From the territories? You two belong to the Marquise of Kiev's house, right?" asked Seth.

Dropping her eyes to Ion's hips, Seth noticed the hilt of the short sword he'd borrowed without permission when they'd fled the Marquise of Kiev's mansion. The family crest of the Marquise of Kiev, the "Virgin Carrying Spear," was engraved on it. Only one sharp slave girl would have noticed that.

"So your master is Lady Astharoshe Asran? What business do the Directly Reporting Chief Inspector's citizens have at a pharmacy?" asked Seth.

Seth was intrigued as she watched Ion grow increasingly flustered.

"Let's see, um, our business is . . ." Ion began when suddenly his face tensed.

Something had stimulated his sense of smell. His hand extended reflexively and grasped the hilt of his sword. Unable to identify what he'd noticed, he peered toward the shop on the corner of the main street.

"What's that smell?" asked Ion. Pointing his well-shaped nostrils upward, the boy groaned quietly. He certainly sensed it — a peculiar odor that seemed to rot the mucous membranes in his nasal passages.

"What is it, Your Excellency?" asked Esther.

"Grab hold, Esther!" yelled Ion.

Before Esther knew it, Ion's hand had encircled her waist. Holding her tightly, he jumped off the floor without hesitation.

Seeing out of the corner of his eye that Seth's eyes had grown round, Ion leapt at least sixty-five feet. Mobilizing all the muscles in the lower half of his body, he kicked a wall along the way. Leaping an additional thirty feet, he landed on the second floor of the target building. Unfortunately, there was a closed glass window there. The boy and girl looked as though they would crash through it, but —

"Urgh!" said Ion, using his sword to cut the glass that stood in their way in two.

Like a shard of glass, the boy flew into the shop, still gripping Esther, and lightly landed on the carpet.

"Argh! Too late!" said Ion.

Rage darkened Ion's face. It wasn't because Mimarl's bloodstained body was rolling next to the wall with his eyes wide open, however. It was the giant in a military overcoat hefting a red battleaxe. The eyes visible through its gas mask gleamed under the dim light of the ceiling lamps.

"Y-your Excellency, be careful!" cried Esther.

The corpse began to move with a swiftness that belied its huge body. Recognizing that the two newcomers were attack targets, it entered battle mode in accordance with its attack program.

Ion had also assumed a defensive posture. Pushing Esther behind him, he held his sword in front of his body. The giant prepared for attack, its axe raised.

"Urgh!" grunted Ion.

A sharp scream overlapped with a wheezing cry.

Ion exhaled as he jerked his body, nimbly moving behind the giant. By the time the monstrous axe cut the air and gouged through the floor, Ion's short sword had struck the nape of his target's neck, disappearing somewhere in between it and the head.

While listening to the echo of breaking neck, the boy mumbled, "Battle isn't just wrangling from the front."

His enemy's immense body crumpled into a heap and didn't make any more movement following a sharp shudder.

Looking down at it, Ion said, "However, it seems like a very cowardly way of doing battle to me. As for me, more like this — "

"Your Excellency, p-please come here a moment!" said Esther in a shrill voice. Running up to the bloodied Mimarl's side, she turned around urgently. "This person . . . Mimarl is still alive!"

"What?" said Ion, flabbergasted.

Esther laid Mimarl's head in his lap. Mimarl had probably received one axe blow. The man's flank had been severed and was stained bright red: The thick leather vest he wore under his citizen's uniform had likely averted instant death. It was unclear what point there was in having his severe pain prolonged for the few seconds before he died, but still, barely alive, the young Terran was lying prone.

"Mimarl, can you hear my voice?" asked Ion as he peered into the man's face. Worried that Mimarl's life was ending by the second, Ion continued, "If this disgusting corpse came here to kill you . . . After all, it was you who gave information about me to these people. But why? Why did you betray me?"

"Forgive . . . Please forgive me . . . master," said Mimarl, opening his chalk-white eyelids weakly. Barely audible, he said, "I never thought that person, the mansion . . . meant to kill the Duchess of Moldova . . ."

"That person?" asked Ion.

A deep canyon emerged between the boy's eyebrows. When a citizen said "that person," it probably meant a *boyar*. It was undoubtedly one of the hard-liners. But what did he mean by "impossible"?

"Tell me, Mimarl!" insisted Ion in a seething tone. He couldn't let such a valuable piece of information die with the family retainer.

"Talk! Who made you a traitor? Who killed my grandmother?" asked Ion.

"That's . . ." Mimarl began. Inhaling one last breath, his chest swelled. He was in a serious ischemic state. Even his blood had already slowed. But the traitor still managed to eek out his remaining strength. "His Excellency the Baron . . . Baron of Luxor ... Radu Barvon."

Ion felt the blood drain from his face. "What did you just say?" he asked.

Forgetting that the hand he extended involuntarily was stained red, Ion grasped the chest of the bloody citizen's clothing and howled, "I'm asking you what you just said, Mimarl! It's Radu? Impossible! He's long since dead!"

Mimarl attempted to cough out a few more words, but a clot of red-black blood leaked from his lips instead. All of a sudden, his body fell back into an arch.

"Oh, no!" cried Esther.

By the time she opened his mouth to clear his airway, Mimarl's body became still as if some switch had been thrown.

"He's dead," Esther muttered as though she herself were half dead. "Lord, guide his soul to Heaven. Amen."

Making the sign of the cross, she gently closed the former citizen's eyelids, which had lost their power of sight forever. They remained pointed peacefully toward the sky.

"Radu?" said Ion, without a care for the newly deceased. "That's crazy! He died long ago. And before my very eyes!"

That man had certainly died in the desert city. Burned by the sun, showered with bullets, then he'd fallen into the sea far below and died. He shouldn't have had a chance in Hell of surviving. Surely what Mimarl had said was some kind of lie. He was undoubtedly trying to deceive him until the end.

But why? Why go that far to fool me, Ion wondered.

"Look out, Your Excellency!" Esther screamed.

Had Ion caught a glimpse of himself reflected in Esther's eyes, he would have noticed the threat that lurked behind him and pounced on the spot, drawing his sword to thwart his enemy. But the boy was caught completely by surprise and foolishly turned around at the wrong time. Reflected in his eyes was the giant Ion had thought he'd defeated before. He failed to completely sever his enemy's neck. The lower half of its body seemed unable to move, but it managed to arch the upper half of its body just enough to swing the axe mightily toward the petrified Ion.

"Crouch down, Your Excellency!" Esther yelled.

If she hadn't charged with all her might to knock Ion down, his head would have been struck clean off. The battleaxe ripped through the air, grazing the two of them before it noisily struck a stone on the wall, pulverizing it.

Amid the chaos, Esther had withdrawn her sawed-off shotgun from beneath her citizen's clothing and aimed it toward the zombie's head. With a roar, the zombie's head spewed blood plasma. Its trunk fell face up, and this time, it couldn't get up again.

"Is it possible it can still move? You saved me, Esther," said Ion. Shuddering, Ion rubbed his head, which was horrifyingly close to being decapitated.

Esther didn't respond to Ion's gratitude. Still gripping her shotgun, her body shivered slightly. Glancing at her, Ion noticed that a strange, warm liquid was dripping from her body. "What's wrong, Esther? Is ... is that blood?" he asked.

Esther gritted her teeth through her curtain of red hair; her face was blanched. The shotgun fell with a clatter from her powerless fingers right before a large quantity of blood began flowing from her right shoulder.

"E-Esther, hang on! Argh, this is . . ." Ion stammered, glaring at the evil weapon lodged in the wall.

The axe had probably deeply gouged Esther's upper arm. She was losing a lot of blood, but wasn't making so much as a sound she was in so much pain. The sweat that poured from her stark white face drenched Ion's hand.

"We need to get to a hospital at once!" said Ion.

"N-no, Your Excellency," said Esther, her breathing ragged. The nun slowly opened her eyes and grabbed the panicked boy's sleeve. "No hospital. It would only offer a clue to your pursuers."

Ion was completely confused and was fraught with worry that the girl's face was beginning to look waxen. If the blood loss continued, the frail Terran would certainly die.

At his wits' end, Ion looked up toward Heaven. *What should I do?*

"You look like you're in a fix. If it's all right, can I help?" asked Seth. "Sister, you're badly hurt. If I leave you here, you'll surely die. May I at least check you?"

"You?" asked Ion. He had no idea when the tea seller had reappeared. And why was she here?

Ion bared his fangs and shouted angrily, "Get out, girl! This is none of your business!"

"Hey, are you really in the position to say that kind of thing?" Seth asked. "If you don't hurry, that girl — Oh no! Shock is setting in!"

It almost sounded as if Seth was bluffing, but what she said was correct. Esther's body was starting to shake in Ion's arms. The blood loss was causing shock.

"Esther!" cried Ion.

"This is no time to dawdle. Let's stop the blood loss immediately. Boy, you press here. Don't let go until I tell you. All right?" said Seth.

It was rare for a slave girl to say things in this manner. Seth's tone took no account of the boy's nobility.

The girl's delicate hands held a bandage she had hidden on her person.

"What are you?" asked Ion, staring at the girl. He was astounded by her efficient first aid skills. "Who are you?"

"Hmmm, me?" asked Seth. Her hands continued wrapping the bandage with surprising dexterity. Winking one eye mischievously, she said, "Didn't I tell you before? I'm Seth. Just a pretty girl."

IV

"I'm very sorry, Your Majesty," said Radu. The blue-haired Methuselah knelt awkwardly, bowing his head as a sign of respect to his ruler beyond the bamboo screen.

"The crime of a courtier who returns late is worth ten thousand deaths. Yet, because there is a reason, please forgive me," said Radu.

<That's enough. Never mind that, Baron of Luxor. >

A minor Shockwave rippled among the attendees. But the Empress's voice echoed heavily, overpowering the noise.

<Is what you said just now true? If true, it is serious. Answer carefully. >

"Regrettably, it is completely true, Your Majesty. Count of Memphis betrayed this Empire and allied with the enemy called the Vatican. I steadfastly attest to it," said Radu.

The Baron of Luxor's face was severely pale, but the man remained impressively calm. Nodding sincerely, he regarded the throne and those within the assembly hall.

"As Your Majesty knows, three months ago, Count of Memphis and I were charged with an Imperial decree and arrived in Carthage. He then entered a Vatican building alone and contacted one of the Cardinals. I didn't accompany him, but he must have plotted some sort of conspiracy with the Terrans at that point. He also proposed that I, the Assistant Envoy, help carry out that plot. As soon as I refused, he tried to murder me," said Radu.

<And the plot?>

All ears in the assembly hall concentrated on a single disturbing word — not *murder*, but *plot*. The Empress was no exception.

<What was the plot, Baron? What do you mean when you say he was plotting with the Terrans?>

"I meant that ..." said Radu.

Whether he was self-conscious or simply nervous about speaking in front of an audience, Radu glanced at the bamboo curtain as he hesitated to speak.

<I'll allow it, Baron of Luxor. You should testify before the lords.>

"Then I will say it. The Vatican and Count of Memphis were plotting to end Your Majesty's life," said Radu.

Assassinate the Empress! A loud uproar broke out inside the hall. Only the Palace Guards, standing like a motionless red wall, remained silent. All the other attendees were talking to their neighbors, unable to conceal their shock.

Radu kept silent, waiting for the impact of the blow to diffuse, but then he continued to summarize his report in a pained voice. "As your retainer surmises, the Duchess of Moldova's misfortune is probably related to that plot. She may have been killed for refusing to cooperate with Count of Memphis, as I did. Aren't the two Terrans accompanying Count of Memphis assassins sent by the Vatican?"

"Did you hear, everyone?" shouted Baybars in support of the blue-haired Methuselah. "Ion Fortuna, Count of Memphis's rebellion is clear from Baron of Luxor's testimony. This is treason!"

Nobody was more silent than Sulayman, who bit his lip hearing Baybars speak.

Glaring back at Sulayman, the Chief of the Palace Guards raised his voice even louder. "Lords, this is a declaration of war upon us. Count of Memphis's treasonous conduct and the Terrans' involvement is proof of that. We should penalize those lawless Terrans of the Vatican immediately!"

A low voice cut off the black giant, who was still speaking zealously.

<Enough, Baybars.>

The ominous voice of indiscriminate gender silenced Baybars and then ordered with icy calm: <You should desist. My mind is already made up. Listen, my beloved children of the night ..>

The shadow behind the bamboo curtain wavered slightly, likely because the Empress had arisen from the throne. The nobles waited with baited breath as the Empress slowly opened her mouth.

<My proud swords of the Empire, I address all of you when I say that our Empire will rise to its full strength and investigate the true cause of Mirka Fortuna's death. The police authorities have been given full authority to do what they need to find Count of Memphis and the two others. I will absolutely not tolerate their escape. >

All the members of the Inspection Institution, which controlled the nobles, and the Patrol Institution, the capital's police force, nodded sternly. It was rare for the Empress to exhibit this much emotion. It went without saying that the attendees had little hope for a vacation.

<Until the truth is discovered, I order each of the City Guards in Timisoara, Heraklion, Athens, and Alexandria to be ready for battle. City Commanders, take heed.>

The City Commanders, whose holograms were combined into the second row, bowed reverently at the Empress's words. Along with the Commanders-in-Chief of each local army, the City Commanders also possessed the authority to rule the local lords in their jurisdiction. Soon, the national boundaries would bustle with the rush of nobles and their private armies responding to the call. A whirlwind of tension swirled about the assembly hall.

The Empress fell silent, having finished issuing Imperial commands. No one could guess what expression she wore, not even a Methuselah, who had the power of sight. It was nearly certain, however, that she sat behind the bamboo curtain with her eyes closed.

The heavy hush seemed to last forever, but then a deep, maudlin voice echoed throughout the hall.

<My children ..>

It was not the sound of someone who would crumble or cower easily. The low drone was that of a goddess of judgment who'd sworn vengeance.

<Our lovely daughter's death is unforgivable. I will spread the wings of vengeance over the heads of those who killed her, and anyone who had anything to do with it. Whether it is an individual, a nation, or an organization, I will show no mercy. So heed.>

Awed by the Empress's anger, those assembled hung their heads.

Aste also bowed her head reverently, but she unintentionally raised her eyebrows. *This has gotten bad*, she thought to herself.

It was the worst possible scenario for both the Count of Memphis and the Vatican's envoys. Aste went over every detail of the dire scenario in her head: *I've come to the place where I may be charged as a suspect in the Duchess of Moldova's death. If we are unwise in trying to defend ourselves now, this time Aste herself might be strung up.*

Although I haven't been directly connected to the murder at this point in time, the Imperial order given to Timisoara and Heraklion could become a profound problem. The four City Guards who received Imperial orders are all military positions located at the border of Terran nations. If these outfits assume battle posture, it will naturally heighten the Outer's concern. If the situation escalates, it may even cause strife with the Outer.

"Father, I'm certain you said Baron of Luxor was dead," said Astharoshe angrily. She had every intention of protecting Count of Memphis and the other as long as possible.

Before Abel could answer, a passerby appeared. Aste turned around to ask again, but the man who was standing there had vanished like smoke.

V

The Celestial Imperial Palace was the center of the Empire. It was a place of government and was the location of the Empress's residence castle.

Compared to the complex architecture of the Outer Court, a place of statecraft north of the Imperial Palace that was open to nobles, the Inner Court in the southern section contained the Imperial Palace—the Empress's private domain. The Palace Guards strictly guarded it, allowing only a few nobles who received the Empress's permission in. Care for the Empress, as well as the rare animals she kept as pets, was almost completely carried out by automata.

The Inner Court's "Boundary Room," situated in the innermost section of the Imperial Palace, served as the Empress's living room. The interior of the expansive room was manmade, yet it was always filled with the scent of green woods and the chirping of the dozens of wild birds that had been released inside. But this night, the voice that rang throughout the emerald chamber sounded like thunder off in the distance.

<Lord Baybars, have you discovered Count of Memphis's whereabouts yet? And what about the Vatican Terrans accompanying him? It will be a big problem if those people have any chance of escaping. >

"I take that point very seriously," said Baybars.

Beyond the rolled-up bamboo curtain, a huge door that resembled a castle gate loomed. The black giant bowed reverently toward the Imperial throne.

The Chief of the Imperial Palace Guards Baybars, Baron of Khartoum, shrugged his broad shoulders, and reported to the Empress: "If we search every corner of the city, we will find them for certain. If we hurry, the search should be finished within one or two days."

<Hmmm . . .>

The sigh of the girl seated on the throne wasn't deep or resounding. The jade-colored veil that hung in front of her face didn't only mask her countenance, but it also mechanically altered her voice so no one could guess her true feelings on matters.

For a moment, the Empress of the night gazed at the ceiling as if she were letting her thoughts flow upward, but before long she nodded at the Chief of the Palace Guards.

<Fine. You must be tired, Baron. Go and rest.>

"Indeed!" exclaimed Baybars.

The bulky Methuselah lowered his head even farther as he turned on his heel. The red-masked Ienichieri followed, leaving the room.

The room, now empty except for one, seemed immense. The sole girl remained seated until the footsteps of the Palace Guards grew distant and finally faded away. She placed her painfully slender fingers to her face and nonchalantly flipped up her veil, revealing a head of black hair and a nearly transparent face.

"There we go," said the Empress.

The raven-haired girl jumped down from the throne with fairy-like lightness. Her copper-colored eyes flashed mischievously as she walked toward the window.

Beyond the large crystal window was a huge forest, which occupied eighty percent of the Inner Court. Myriad rare animals had been set loose in it, forming a rich ecosystem. At the edge of the trees, on the opposite shore, between the Celestial Imperial Palace and the Halic Golden Horn, shone the city lights in the Methuselah district. The beauty of the illusory light amid the heart of darkness was indescribable. The Empress frequently gazed upon the forest and city, and the strange harmony they created.

Her gaze still fixed outside the window, the Empress turned when she heard a bell-like voice behind her. "Who's there?" she asked. "A daring rascal who's invaded my palace? An invader who knows that this is the Imperial Palace of the New Human Empire?"

One of the tapestries on the wall fluttered, producing a slender shadow next to it.

"Excuse me," said Abel apologetically. "I wouldn't have gotten to see you if I'd followed the proper procedure. I humbly beg your pardon for my rudeness.

The girl turned her cold eyes on the silver-haired young man. "Terran?" she asked. "Who are you?"

"I am Father Abel. I've come from the Vatican's Department of Foreign Affairs," said the priest.

He'd probably snuck through the forest to get from the Outer Court into the Empress's chamber. Without even brushing off the leaves that stuck to his dolman, the tall man bowed reverently. "I'm the one who brought a document from my superior, Cardinal Caterina Sforza, Duchess of Milan, to Your Majesty."

"From the Vatican," repeated the Empress flatly.

It was difficult to tell whether she was being respectful or didn't feel threatened by the Terran. Either way, the Empress's demeanor was calm. Her eyes, on the other hand, appeared to be made of countless icy needles.

"Then it seems my document arrived safely. I'd like to thank you for your long journey, but—" said the Empress, stopping herself. Her almond-shaped eyes narrowed. Her voice was soft as silk, but subtly hostile. "Where is the envoy I sent? Where is Ion Fortuna, Count of Memphis? And the incident the other day, where Mirka Fortuna's mansion was burned . . . Isn't there something you want to tell me, Vatican man?"

"Before I explain that matter, I'd like to ask one thing," said Abel with a calm face. He showed no sign of fear standing in front of the Empress of the vampires. But what he said next was highly inappropriate. "Who are you?"

"What?" asked the Empress.

The Terran knew who stood before him, and had purposefully come to see her. But he was bold to have asked, "Who are you?" Still, he didn't hesitate. His eyes appeared infinitely calm and wise.

"You who are before me, who in the world are you?" asked Abel.

"You say strange things, Vatican envoy," said the Empress. After she stared at the face beneath the silver hair for a full thirty seconds, she added expressionlessly, "This is the Boundary Room, the Empress's living room. Who else could be here but the Empress of the New Human Empire? We are the only ruler of the Empire, Augusta Vladika."

Despite hearing her name presented so grandly, no sign of acceptance crossed the priest's face. In fact, he looked more suspicious than before. "Really? Are you really the Empress?" asked Abel.

"What are you trying to suggest, Terran?" asked the Empress. Her slender hand slowly reached toward the short sword hidden on her hip. "What are you trying to say? No, I'll change the question. What do you know?"

All of a sudden, a gruff male voice thundered from outside the door. "Excuse me!"

As Abel and the Empress whipped around, somebody came bursting through door with explosive force.

"The Ienichieri on night watch found evidence of an intruder at the gate! It's possible that somebody tried to invade the Inner Court. Urgh! This guy?" said Baybars. The pitch-black Methuselah's eyes fixed on Abel, and for an instant, Baybars stood, his mouth agape. But the next instant, he unsheathed his prized sword from his back with a high-pitched clank.

"Outsider! Who are you?"

The black sword sliced through the air, but the silver-haired man nimbly dodged its wrath. Ducking his head low without hesitation, Abel charged toward the window. His movements were fast for a Terran, but the act was reckless considering his opponent was a Methuselah, who boasted the fastest reaction speed on Earth.

The menacing shadow seemed to disappear for an instant, but then it darted before Abel's eyes like a daydream.

"You think you'll escape?" shouted Baybars. "Die!"

"Stop, Baybars!" ordered the Empress. Her hair mussed, she stood with both arms spread wide before Baybars' sword. "I need to question him. Don't kill him!"

As Vladika roared at the Chief of the Palace Guards, Abel tucked his body into a ball and plunged through the glass. A high-pitched shattering noise reverberated as his tall body fell like a pebble toward the darkness below, wrapped in powdered snow-like glass shards. One breath later, they could faintly hear the sound of tree branches breaking.

By the time the two Methuselahs, the Empress and the Chief of the Palace Guards, ran to the window, the priest had already disappeared. Darkness was no hindrance to the sight of a Methuselah, but the towering trees obstructed their view.

Baybars stared into the forest that had swallowed the priest, muttering, "He's fast for a Terran, but .. ."

Shadows of Ienichieri beginning to deploy in the darkness were visible down below. They'd probably heard the disturbance.

"... no Terran can escape my Ienichieri," Baybars continued. "We'll capture him quickly. Please don't worry, Your Majesty."

However, the Empress didn't hear the Chief of the Palace Guards' words. Her face reddened as she gazed down at the forest that had devoured the tall shadow. "He can't ..."

In the sky above the forest, the two moons shone down upon the city full of people, casting a pale white light onto the Empress's face.

VI

"Esther?" said Ion. Her dream interrupted by the voice, Esther's instinct was to jump. But her body twisted at the severe pain that ran through her shoulder.

"No, Esther, don't move! Your wound will open!" Ion warned, grabbing her wrists.

She was in so much pain that she didn't bother to open her eyes. The aching felt like being hit with a whip of fire. She desperately opened her lips, allowing oxygen to flow into her lungs. The smell of alcohol mixed with fresh air filled her nose, and soon, one part of her brain began to operate normally.

"Esther, Are you all right?" asked Ion, gazing down at his companion.

"Your Excellency the Count?" asked Esther, peering into the copper-colored eyes that kept watch over her.

Still looking up at Ion and the unfamiliar ceiling above him, Esther attempted to knit together the threads of her memory. *It seems as though I was having a very bad dream, but I don't want to remember. Why am I sleeping in a place like this? And why is my body this hot? Yes, I'm certain that I snuck out with this boy while Father Nightroad was gone and escaped into the city, and then in Mimarl's shop . . .*

"Y-yes! After that, I—" Esther exclaimed out loud.

"After that was a big uproar," Seth interrupted. "Besides the shop owner being killed, an unidentified body was rolling around. It was difficult to escape. That's that. So how do you feel, Sister?"

It was obvious to Esther the voice wasn't the boy's. Based on her outward appearance, the girl's age wasn't that far from Ion's.

"You? The girl who sold us tea before?" asked Esther.

"I'm Seth," said the girl, smiling mischievously as she tossed a bundle of bandages like a ball.

She wasn't wearing the gray clothes of a slave now. Instead, she wore a white dolman, the uniform of a student in a specialty-training course before being appointed a citizen.

"My main job is medical student, studying at the high-class medical hospital. The tea selling is only to earn pocket money. I really earn a lot at that job," said Seth.

"A medical student at the high-class medical hospital?" asked Esther.

A high-class medical hospital would certainly be located at a high-class educational institution, likely at an Outer university. Could a child like this be a student there? She looked at least three or four years younger than Esther.

Esther's doubts were probably written all over her face.

The girl twisted her lips impishly. "Well, Sister, it's up to you whether to believe me or not. But I'm the one who tended to your wound. If you'd depended on those doctors, you might have died," said Seth.

"You did this? And here in this room?" asked Esther.

The red-tinged Bosphorus and the Methuselah district, both far off in the distance, were visible from the bedside window. That meant this was definitely the Terran district on the east coast, a place not far from the city center.

The high-ceilinged room was clean, but it was rather plain and seemed unsuitable for the adolescent girl. The only furniture in the room was the bed Esther was resting on and a

desk, with a tea set placed on it. One of the walls had a built-in shelf for clothing, but because all the outfits were gray, there was a lot of extra room.

How was I treated in a place like this? Esther thought. *That wound should've been fatal. How long have I been sleeping, anyway?*

"Um, how long have I been asleep?" asked Esther.

"The whole day," Seth replied. She checked the clock on the wall. "You slept well. You were very tired, weren't you?"

"Yes, now that you mention it, a little," said Esther.

All of a sudden, she became startled. *Haven't I been speaking in Roman common language for a while?* Esther thought to herself. *And didn't that girl also answer in Roman language?*

"You shouldn't be upset. I already know you're from the Outer," said Seth, still grinning. She sat cross-legged on the sofa. "Everything you said in your sleep was in Outer language. It was about half-Hungarian and half-Roman? And you were with some second-rate nobleman, right?"

Ion's head drooped apologetically. "Sorry, Esther, I told her." He put his mouth to Esther's ear as she flinched and lowered his voice even more. "Don't worry. I haven't told her you're from the Vatican. I told her you were a girl I met in the Outer and brought with me."

"You're doing pretty well, aren't you, young noble? Bringing a Terran girl, and an Outer one at that, into the Empire," said Seth nonchalantly.

For a Terran in the Empire, she was girl who was not very afraid of Methuselahs. It was rare for a citizen to be this unfettered in front of a noble.

"Love between a Methuselah and a Terran is taboo in this country. Who knows what will happen if you're discovered by the Inspection Institution. But please don't worry, because I won't tell on you. In exchange, will you keep it a secret that I was selling tea in a place like that? If I'm found out, I'll be kicked out of the high-class medical hospital," said Seth. "You delinquent. Do you mean to exploit a person's weakness?" asked Ion. "Well, fine." He nodded graciously as if he were relieved that he'd fooled Seth about Esther's true identity.

After coughing once, Ion continued to lecture the girl with the shimmering eyes. "Concerning your dishonesty, I will overlook it this time. But listen, girl—from here on in, you mustn't do such a thing. For Terrans to lie about their social status and engage in work outside their legal employment is strictly forbidden by Imperial law. As a student, you should be diligent about your studies, which are your duty contribute to this Imperial society."

"Is that the time already? Say, aren't you two hungry?" asked Seth.

"Listen to the person speaking to you!" shouted Ion, angry at having his sermon interrupted.

Seth showed absolutely no sign of noticing his annoyance. While humming, she continued rolling bandages.

"Ugh! Absolutely deplorable! Although there are extenuating circumstances, overlooking the illegality of such a bad citizen, and having to break Imperial law . . . Your Majesty, please, forgive the crimes of your unworthy subject," said Ion.

"This young nobleman is rather funny. It's been a long time since I found one this worthy of teasing," said Seth. Patting Ion's back as he bowed deeply in the direction of the Celestial Imperial Palace, she grinned. "By the way, young nobleman, when you're ready, will you go buy us something to eat? We have to nourish Esther, right?"

"Why should I do a maidservant's work? You go!" said Ion, baring his fangs at the rude nonsense.

"Me? But I have to change Esther's bandages now, and then change her clothes. Or maybe you can change her clothes, young noble," Seth suggested.

Ion turned red in acknowledgement of his defeat. Turning on his heel as if sulking, he left the bedroom, hitting the door on the way out. "Listen, girl, I'll absolutely make you remember this disrespect later. Don't forget it!"

"Yes, yes. If you want side dishes, the shop on the street corner is cheap and delicious. I'd love some meat-stuffed tomatoes," said Seth, winking.

"How should I know!" said Ion.

Seth listened with a suppressed giggle to the footsteps growing distant as they trudged down the corridor beyond closed door. When they disappeared, she turned back to her patient. "Now the nuisance has disappeared. Esther, can I get you to show me your skin?"

"Eh? Oh, yes," said Esther.

Esther was still aghast at the exchange between Ion and Seth, but she suddenly came to when she was spoken to. She bared her shoulder as asked. The wound was larger than she'd thought, but it looked like the bleeding had completely stopped. When she peeked at it again, she noticed the flesh had been very deeply gouged, but she hadn't died of blood loss. It was luck that had saved her, but even more than that, it was because of the first aid administered on the spot and because the treatment thereafter had been excellent.

"Favorable progress. It's good to be young. The damage to the blood vessels has already closed up and swelling of the neighboring capillaries has already begun. You should be able to move in two or three days," said Seth.

Whistling as if she were impressed, Seth began to artfully replace the medicine-smeared gauze. Her studied movements were those of a veteran doctor.

"Um, Miss Seth?" asked Esther.

"Just Seth is fine, Esther. All of my brothers and friends call me that," said the girl.

"W-well, Miss Seth," Esther began, "You look a lot younger than I do. How old are you really?"

"Me? I'll be thirteen this year," Seth replied. "So?"

"Th-thirteen . . ." Esther repeated. *Four years younger than I am*, she thought. "It's amazing doing this kind of thing at that age. Or are all people in the Empire like you?"

"Work is in accordance with individual character and effort. Everybody has his and her own field of work, right? Not all Terrans can accept high-class education and become citizens," said Seth, shrugging.

After reapplying the gauze, Seth appeared as though she were lost in thought. "At least we're given an equal opportunity. Our chance to get an education is not limited by birth or finances, like in the Outer. If you work hard and pass the exams, anybody can become a citizen, no matter how old. Qualification to take the exams is not limited. This isn't necessarily limited to education, either. It's the Empire's style to value Terrans' hard work and what the individual can do so that Methuselahs and Terrans can coexist peacefully."

"Empire's style? Coexist?" asked Esther, perplexed.

According to what Esther heard in the Outer, Terrans in the Empire were treated no differently than slaves. Humans were ruled by the vampires and lived like a bunch of fearful animals. But if that were so, what about the girl standing before her? Weren't the Terrans milling about the city full of life? This person, and everything about the nation that Esther had witnessed since entering the Empire, were very different from what she'd heard.

"The Terrans are the Methuselahs' slaves, right?" asked Esther. She slowly moved her shoulder to ascertain the condition of her wound. "No matter how favorably treated, Terrans have to work for Methuselahs. Can that be called coexistence?"

"Esther, look at this," said Seth, who had pushed up the window by the bed.

Outside, sunset was approaching and the blue-black veil of night was falling. The white lights of the city blinked as they shone on the channel. The sight, somehow fantastical, was like a dream within a dream.

Seth pointed to the south of the Methuselah district—the location of a dense, green forest, and a huge group of towering buildings. "Esther, you're wrong about one thing. The Terrans' master is not the Methuselahs."

Not a trace of the girl's previous frivolity remained as she pointed to the Celestial Imperial Palace, the residence castle of the one who ruled in the past, ruled in the present, and would rule in the future.

"The Terrans' only master is the Empress of the New Human Empire. They are legally the Empress's property, and to harm them is the same thing as harming the Empress. The Methuselahs are also absolute subjects of the Empress, so in the eyes of the Empress, Terrans and Methuselahs are equal. Can't that be called a kind of racial coexistence?" asked Seth in a subdued tone.

Staring down at the fantastic city that flourished in the dark, Esther pondered. The words she'd heard in her native city of Istvan echoed in her ears: "Coexistence is the stuff of foolish dreams."

The man who'd killed all of Esther's family had said that. He was a pitiful wretch who'd murdered his family to take revenge on the Vatican. At the time, she thought what he'd said was correct. It was impossible to exist with those who killed her family and her friends in the city.

As if provoked by the impatience of not fully understanding, Esther shook her head. "There is an absolute precondition for the coexistence you speak of, Seth," she said. "That is, that the Empress is eternal. If she should die, or if she suddenly changed her mind, this nation's 'coexistence' disappears at that instant. Am I wrong?"

Seth widened her eyes and clapped her hands softly at the redheaded girl's argument. "Amazing! As I thought, you're a smart girl, Esther," she remarked, nodding as if truly impressed. "As you say, only the Empress's existence guarantees the two races' coexistence. If anything happened to her, everything in this nation would crumble. Of course, coexistence is no exception."

Although she'd been praised, Esther's feelings didn't elevate. Was it possible that she wanted to be wrong? She hung her head gloomily. *Can such a fragile thing be true coexistence? Can coexistence that rests entirely on the Empress's shoulders constitute true coexistence?*

That sort of fragile coexistence didn't exist in the Outer. There was only eternal strife and hatred there. People who hated Methuselahs branded them as "vampires," and Methuselahs who scorned humans referred to them as "cattle." Esther herself was one of the latter.

Pulling herself from deep thought, Esther gathered herself. She was surprised that she was even considering the possibility of coexistence. Wasn't she of the understanding that that kind of thing was impossible? There was nobody who understood as well as she did the deep divide between the two races.

But there were faces she couldn't get out of her mind: Jura, Radu, Aste, and Ion—people who laughed, cried, raged, and grieved in front of Esther. They, too ..

Esther was having a hard time settling her restless mind, when all of a sudden the girls heard a raucous noise from outside the room.

"Ah, young nobleman?" asked Seth. The serious look on her face disappeared completely as she stood up. She quickly ran to the door, but as she placed her hand on the knob —

"Wah?" Seth exclaimed.

The knob and hinges shattered with a shriek after receiving a blow from outside. Then, the wooden door splintered into bits, sending Seth's body flying.

"Seth?" cried Esther. Watching Seth's small frame hit the floor hard, Esther's eyes widened. But they opened even wider when she saw the huge shadow pushing in through the door.

"Th-that thing!"

Esther leapt out of bed at the sight of the pitch-black military overcoat flapping ominously in the gust. Forgetting the pain in her shoulder, she tried to run for her shotgun, which was leaning against the wall. She reached for its gunstock when a huge sound thundered overhead. By the time she glanced up, a black shadow filled Esther's entire field of vision. Before she could recognize the shadow was another enemy crashing through the ceiling, its fist bulldozed the girl's stomach.

"Ugh!" said Esther. Screaming as though squeezing out the contents of her lungs, Esther's body flew against the wall. Something wet was trickling down her numb right arm; her wound had probably reopened from the blow. *Is my field of vision so dark because I hit my head?* she wondered.

"Seth? Your Excellency?" said Esther weakly.

Esther somehow opened her eyes, even though her consciousness had begun to dim. Besides the paralysis in her shoulder, a tremendous ringing deafened her ears. Still, she struggled to lift her heavy eyelids, which felt like lead.

In her hazy field of vision, she could see two large black shadows and one white shadow that seemed to be confronting them. She couldn't tell if it was Seth or Ion. Either way, the two black shadows were now swinging down their massive battleaxes upon the frozen white shadow.

"Run!" Esther hollered. But because of the tinnitus, she could barely hear her own voice.

Why are my ears ringing like this? With that final thought, the nun's consciousness slipped somewhere into the darkness.

"Why do I, Count of Memphis, the Chief Imperial Sword Bearer, have to go shopping like a maidservant?" asked Ion as he lugged a small mountain of paper bags. The deserted alley was gloomy, but he didn't feel as though he were in danger. "Also, what was with that Terran in the shop just now? 'Cute boy,' was it? 'Cute?' Making fun of me, the Chief Imperial Sword Bearer, of all people."

Ion's first experience with shopping was truly unpleasant. As he entered the market, shop girls quickly spotted him and ran over. Pulled this way and that by the shrill-voiced girls, he continued to be jostled and cajoled, if Ion had been an actual Terran boy, he might have done a jig because he'd received a price reduction of thirty percent. However, for Count of Memphis, Chief Imperial Sword Bearer, pillar of the Empire, it was an irksome experience he wanted to forget as soon as possible.

After all, housework was a chore that Methuselaha had very little to do with. There was no time for them to take part in such things, especially when they were burdened with the government and military, and were equal to less than one percent of the Terran population.

The only exception was educating the children the Methuselahs had borne. They embraced the concept of matrilineal family, becoming one huge family who educated their own. With that exception, the general housework was almost always entrusted to citizens or automata.

"And Seth—why do I have to take orders from that no-good girl? A girl like that... If I felt like it... No, I mustn't, I mustn't, I mustn't!" shouted Ion. Still carrying the paper bags, he chewed on his lip. "Patience, Ion. This is all in order to carry out Augusta's Imperial decree. If it means meeting our great mother's expectations, even if it means bowing on bended knee to a no-good girl, you must endure it! That is the duty of nobles."

Chief Imperial Sword Bearer was first among the many posts on the list of the career courses, but even Ion had never seen the Empress's face. However, according to what his late grandmother said, she was "dignity and magnificence in complete harmony, perfectly suited to be mother to all us Methuselahs." It was pathetic for him, her subject, to whine like this.

Still cursing, Ion arrived in front of the tea seller's house. Taking a deep breath, he regained his composure. His face suddenly clouded as he reached for the doorknob. Holding the paper bags tightly, he cautiously looked left and right.

A rush of fierce, even calamitous, wind from beyond the night sky mowed him down. At least ten short swords thrust down from above toward Ion's head. The next moment, the paper bags were rolling, shredded to bits, in the alley. But the boy who'd been holding them wasn't there.

"Idiot! You thought that trick would work on me?" said Ion. Leaping into the air, resembling a streak of blue painting the night sky, Ion laughed in ridicule. His hand was already on the short sword at his hip. "Don't underestimate me. I'm Ion Fortuna, Count of Memphis!"

Drawing his sword in mid-air, Ion energetically launched himself off the wall of the house that faced the alley, his petite body soaring higher than the roof. He aimed for the head of somebody who'd been lurking on the roof and attacked with the energy of a bird of prey that had located his kill.

"A proud Imperial noble and Chief Imperial Sword Bearer!" shouted Ion.

By the time the attacker had turned around, the naked blade had plunged down and sliced into its form. Cat-like, Ion landed on the roof as blood rained down overhead.

"It seems you've fully recovered, haven't you, Ion?" asked Radu, sarcastically.

"This is crazy. I thought I'd cut you down!" Ion said. Trembling, he instinctively jumped back, but somebody stopped him from behind.

The attacker whispered in Ion's ear as Ion fought to shake him off. "Being taken down was awful. Aren't you acting too cold toward a friend you haven't seen for a long time, my *tovarisch*?" asked Radu.

The boy's expression froze at the sound of his attacker's voice. "R-Radu?" Ion stammered.

"It's been a long time, Ion," said Radu. Beneath his dark hair, his copper eyes smiled. Radu Barvon, Baron of Luxor, the friend Ion should have lost forever, was standing beneath the night sky, looking exactly the same as he'd remembered.

"Radu! How? You should've died that day," said Ion.

"Died? Oh dear. Then how am I standing before you now?" asked Radu, wearing a sarcastic grin.

Using the incomparable strength of the Efreet, Radu hoisted the flailing boy to eye level.

Unable to free himself, Ion recalled how atop that airship, this man had surely been roasted by the sun and his body had fallen into the sea. Although he was a mighty Methuselah,

there was only a one in ten thousand chance of surviving that. But Ion couldn't detect one blemish on Radu's white face.

"Are you seeing things again? Although I don't think the dead can talk like this," Radu quipped.

"Then what Mimarl said was true," said Ion. After finally recovering from his shock, Ion glared at his opponent, emotion welling in his eyes. "Radu, you've trapped me again! But why? Why this kind of elaborate farce? Do you hate me that much?"

"Hate? Don't be conceited. I don't particularly care about a little boy like you. I have more important business. You're merely a decoy to draw the attention of the court. You're no more significant than that," said Radu.

"Business?" asked Ion. He felt a curious chill graze his back. Or was it the icy feelings he felt for this man who might as well have been a stranger? "What business? Killing my grandmother and framing me for that crime? What are you planning that would make you take things so far?" Ion tried to remain calm, but he couldn't keep his voice from shrieking. Radu smiled coldly as he stared at his former friend's face. "I'll tell you, specially," Radu said, whispering into Ion's ear. "We will kill the Empress."

"Wha—?" said Ion, who hadn't been as shocked when he was told that *he* would be killed. Ion's eyes looked as though they would pop out of his pale face. "What d-did you just say? Kill Her Majesty? Do you really think you can do such a ridiculous thing?"

"Ridiculous thing?" Radu repeated. In contrast to the spluttering boy, Radu was calm. With his lips still at Ion's ear, he cocked his head. "Is killing the Empress really such a ridiculous thing?"

"Her Majesty the Empress?" said Ion. He studied his former friend's calm expression and grimaced as if he were looking for signs of madness. "You couldn't possibly kill the mother of all Methuselahs, the one who will rule the Empire eternally!"

"I'll correct what I said a little while ago, Ion. You're not a child," said Radu. There was neither madness nor anger in the man's voice, just a tone that seemed to ridicule everything. A frosty smile was fixed on his face as he sighed deliberately. "You're not a child. You're an idiot child. Rule eternally? Do you think such a thing is actually possible?" Radu shrugged his shoulders dramatically. Stepping away from Ion, he continued, "They say the Empress has lived for eight hundred years, but that's some kind of myth. No Methuselah can live that long. If that story is true, the Empress isn't a Methuselah. Of course, she isn't a Terran. She's 'something' else. I don't believe such a thing. The Empress is mortal. If I believe I can kill her, I can kill her."

"But why, Radu? Why Her Majesty?" Ion asked.

Radu regarded Ion, whose lips were trembling, as if he felt sorry for him and declared "Isn't it obvious? I'm rather bored of this country that's ordered around by some sort of mysterious witch!" His thin lips curled in a devilish way. When he put them back near the boy's ear, the blue-haired Methuselah enunciated his words so as not to be misheard. "We will kill the Empress. After that, we'll destroy those abhorrent Outer Terrans, and become the rulers of this planet. We Methuselahs are qualified for that. We won't let anybody interfere with us taking our rightful place. Not even you, Ion!"

A cry of pain leaked from Ion's lips as Radu's sharp claws gouged deep into Ion's right thigh. The grasp around Ion's wrists grew tighter as he was hefted high off the ground. In severe pain, Ion struggled desperately, but Radu's strength was matchless. As if gazing at a beautiful butterfly mounted in a display case, Radu's copper eyes glimmered wickedly.

"By now, all eyes in the Celestial Imperial Palace are focused entirely on you. Thank you, *Tovarisch*. You've made my work much easier. All I have to do now is make sure there's no chance you're captured," said Radu.

Ion released another tortured scream as Radu's talons twisted inside the wound. Fierce pain ran along his leg, which felt as if it had exploded. But there was something else that pained Ion.

/ wonder if Esther is all right. If this man intends to eliminate me, he can't let her live, Ion thought to himself.

"Are you that worried about Esther?" asked Radu, as if he could read Ion's mind. The blue-haired Methuselah let out a mucous-laden laugh. Your face is like an open book. But Ion, is it sensible to trust the girl that much? She's a Terran, not to mention from the Vatican."

"What?" asked Ion. In his mind, which was beginning to grow hazy from the pain, Ion tried to understand what his opponent was saying. He knew Esther was Terran, even without being told. So what did Radu mean?

"What I'm saying is, haven't you been betrayed again? Why do you think I've known your every movement?" asked Radu.

Finally grasping what Radu was implying, Ion's expression changed. Forgetting his pain, he argued, "That's insane. Are you trying to say Esther betrayed me? It's Impossible. Esther of all people couldn't do such a thing!"

"Oh dear, His Excellency the Count is completely devoted to a Terran girl. If Her Majesty the Empress or your dead grandmother knew, boy, how they would grieve," said Radu, shaking his head solemnly but grinning all the while. He lowered his voice as if revealing some treasured secret. "But, Ion, did you know that she hates you? Not just you, though. She hates all Methuselachs. Did you know that?"

Ion froze momentarily. A sense of unrest muddled his eyes as he glared at his former friend. "Don't speak nonsense, Radu! Esther saved me. How is that —"

"It isn't nonsense. Listen well: Her family was killed by Methuselachs," said Radu.

Killed? Her family? Ion was stuck for words, as he imagined Esther's red hair and the hazel eyes always hiding beneath it. He didn't even notice Radu smiling pleasantly as he watched him. He just dropped his eyes, aghast.

"You didn't know that part, did you, *Tovarisch*?" asked Radu, who had mastered the art of masking sadism as sympathy. "Her home town is Istvan, the town of the Marquis of Hungaria, which was attacked by the Vatican last year. The girl was a foundling and was raised in the church by a bishop named Vitez. But last year, the bishop and all the people in the church were massacred by the Marquis of Hungaria. What a tragic end."

"That's . . ." said Ion, his voice trembling. The girl, who was always fierce and strong, but kind, never acted prejudiced toward Methuselachs, even though she was an Outer Terran.

"It's impossible! It's —"

"Strange, isn't it? That she didn't tell you such an important thing," Radu interjected. The blue-haired demon cackled as he shot more poison into Ion's ear. "Could she have some grudge against you? Or else . . ."

"Or else?" Ion thought. *What is he trying to say?*

The boy's pondering was interrupted by a whip-like red light that sliced through the darkness. Radu pushed Ion away and leapt backward as the temperature quickly rose to a few thousand degrees, turned to gas, and burst. The red light thrashed down, leaving deep gashes in the roof. There was no trace of anything else except a haunting shadow.

"Marquise of Kiev?" said Ion to the slim shadow standing on the roof of a nearby building. When had she appeared?

Aste flashed her wrist with a hardened expression. Her slender hand drew a silver cane, the "Spear of Gei Borg," from which a plasma whip emerged with a screech. The red-hot xenon gas that sprayed from its vacuum chamber swelled in pursuit of the fleeing Efreet.

"Oh dear, it seems I said too much," said Radu. Still, his leisurely composure didn't break before the new enemy. As he bent backward to evade Aste's weapon, he energetically hurled a ball of fire produced in his palm.

Aste quickly adjusted the firing range of the spear as the fireball flew toward her at high speed. With the spear shortened to long sword size, she prepared to strike down the blue flame. But perhaps due to some sort of spell, the flame split in the air and became a few dozen small firebombs. The red light flashed like lightning, striking down the barrage of fire from one side, but there were too many. The remaining firebomb struck Aste squarely in her face.

"Marquise of Kiev!" Abel screamed, imagining that the woman would soon turn to ash. But he managed to fire a gunshot, derailing the fireball that would've engulfed Aste.

"You're slow, Father!" said Aste.

"Yeah, sorry. I stumbled on the stairs. This is painful," said Abel, his tall shadow preceding him. The revolver in his hand was accurately aimed at Radu and didn't waver.

"Baron of Luxor, I don't recommend you resist. Please let go of Count of Memphis, and give up!" demanded Astharoshe.

"Marquise of Kiev and Father Nightroad? It certainly would be foolish to fight in this situation," said Radu, miffed at the arrival of a new opponent. Turning back to the boy still collapsed on the roof, he grimaced regretfully. "Well, isn't this fun? Anyway, there's nothing anyone can do about your kind, Ion."

By the time Ion had realized what his attacker had said, the Efreet had taken several steps backward. His tall, perfectly proportioned body jumped weightlessly into the darkness. ,

"Wait, Radu!" said Ion. He stretched out his hand to no avail. The traitor's figure and wily grin seemingly melted into the night.

"You won't escape!" Astharoshe hollered.

The red light of the xenon gas gushed forth with a piercing shriek, but it only cut darkness, nothing else. The night air turned to ozone and burst; however, the enemy shadow had already entered haste mode and sunk beyond the night, without a trace.

"Argh, he's a quick escape!" said the white-haired beauty.

Meanwhile, Abel ran up to Ion, where he still lay motionless. "Are you all right, Count of Memphis? Ack, your leg is a mess. Can you stand?"

"I'm fine. It will heal quickly. But, Father, why are you two here?" asked Ion.

"Well, when we returned from the Celestial Imperial Palace, the Marquise of Kiev's mansion was in a big uproar. Then, it seemed that you and Esther had disappeared," said Abel. His tone contained a slight hint of criticism as he wrapped a handkerchief around the blood-stained thigh. "It was a pretty big deal, so we hurried to look for you, but we had no idea where you'd gone."

"A strange letter arrived at my home recently. This address was written in it," said Astharoshe.

Ion looked up suspiciously at Aste's face as she leapt from the neighboring roof.

"Letter?" Ion asked. "Who in the world —"

"How should I know?" Astharoshe shouted angrily. She gripped Ion's chest. "Never mind that, brat! I'm certain I told you to stay in the house while I was gone! And you —"

"Say, Aste. Go a little easy on him. We don't have time for that now," said Abel. As he pulled Aste, who was baring her fangs, away from the boy, he asked, "By the way, Count, where's Esther? Wasn't she with you?"

"Esther?" asked Ion.

"*She hates all Methuselahs.*" Ion shook his head to clear it of the poison that afflicted his subconscious. "She's in that house," said Ion, pointing at the lights of the house visible across the way. He stood up and carelessly began to walk ahead, but he screamed and collapsed at the severe pain that ran through his leg.

"Please don't do anything rash. I'll go," assured Abel. Relieved that he'd ascertained Esther's whereabouts, Abel calmly stood up and sprinted down the roof.

"Is your leg all right, Count of Memphis?" asked Astharoshe as she watched Abel leave. Her voice sounded gruff, but she grasped the boy's arm gently, giving him the impression that there was tenderness somewhere in her heart. "If you're able to move, we'll move at once. If we loiter, Terrans will gather. We have to withdraw before then."

"I'm very sorry, Marquise of Kiev," said Ion. Only then he noticed how soft Aste's skin was.

"I did something truly selfish, and caused you trouble. I haven't the words to apologize."

Although Ion expected to be yelled at again, Aste's reply was surprisingly calm. When he glanced up, her amber eyes were peering at him with a faint tinge of concern amid their overall hardness.

"It isn't as though I don't understand your impatience," said Astharoshe. "Besides, it's partially my fault for reviving you too much. Hereafter, refrain from selfish actions."

"Yes, I'll definitely – Ah!" said Ion.

"What's wrong?" asked Astharoshe.

Gripping Aste's hand, Ion shouted, "We d-don't have time to loiter here! Her . . . Majesty is in danger!"

"Her Majesty?" asked Astharoshe. Her white face gradually became a map of deep wrinkles.

Ion stared intently into Astharoshe's eyes. "They . . . Radu intends to murder Her Majesty!"

"What?" Astharoshe exclaimed. Her face went white.

"... er?" asked Abel.

The girl could hear a voice from faraway. Somebody was calling her. Was it Seth? No, it couldn't be. The voice was too warm-sounding.

"Esther!" Abel beckoned.

"Wah!" said Esther. She sprang up so energetically that her head collided with the head of the silver-haired young man who was calling her.

"Owww! Uh, wha . . . Father?" asked Esther. Her eyes were teary from the impact, and there was blood spurting from Abel's nose. *Why is he here?* Esther wondered. *I know I was wounded and carried to this house, and tended to by the girl here. But after that. . . After that? Oh, yes, those guys!*

Esther's eyes darted around. The last image she remembered was the dreadful flash of a sword being swung down over Seth. But where did those giants go? Where was Seth? *Why aren't I dead?* she asked herself.

Clinging to the priest, who was next to her holding his nose to stop the blood, Esther asked hastily, "What happened to that girl? The one who was with me? Where is she?"

"If you mean Count of Memphis, he's perfectly all right. He's only slightly wounded. Aste is with him now," said Abel.

"No, not Count of Memphis," said Esther, shaking her head impatiently. She grabbed her companion's collar and shouted, "There was one more person here, a girl called Seth! What happened to her? Is she all right?"

"What?" asked Abel. The priest looked around anxiously. "There's no such girl here."

"That's . . . Where did she go?" asked Esther, standing up unsteadily. *Where could she be hiding? Had they taken her with them?* she wondered.

Seized by unfortunate thoughts and clueless as to what had happened, Esther approached the closet. The closets that had been open were now firmly shut.

Could she be hiding inside this? Esther thought to herself. Hopeful, she pushed them open.

"Ah!" said Esther, gasping as she took a step back.

A sinister-looking giant in a black coat was standing inside the built-in closets that reached to the ceiling. It was one of her attackers!

"Run, Esther!" cried Abel, moving forward as if to push the girl back. His revolver was already pointed at the enemy's head; it was cocked and ready to fire at any time.

The gun didn't fire bullets, though. Instead of pulling the trigger, the priest narrowed his eyes, staring holes through the enemy shadows.

"Father, 1-look out!" said Esther.

"No, it's all right, Esther," said Abel. "These are . . ."

Abel shook his head as he tried to calm Esther. It was the perfect opportunity to attack, but the two giants stood silently without attempting to move. The priest's gun was still aimed, when all of a sudden, amid the strange silence, the black shadow crumpled.

Causing a considerable amount of misty white smoke, the two enemy shadows shrank as they watched. After the smoke cleared, only their overcoats and a large quantity of fine white powder remained on the floor.

"What just happened?" Esther groaned. It was like some terrible dream.

Abel knelt on the floor and dipped his fingers into the pile of ash. He was far calmer than the nun as he investigated the white powder. With a serious expression, he put his fingertip between his lips, indicating that he'd thought of something.

As the priest put the powder on the tip of his tongue, a bible verse flowed from his mouth:

"God, pour fire and brimstone upon Sodom and Gomorrah, and completely destroy the towns and people." He turned around revealing his stern face and said to the nun holding her breath, "'Then, when Lot's wife disobeyed God's word and looked back, she was turned into a pillar of salt.' Esther, this is salt. It's a pillar of salt."

The Island of Beloved Children

*All the kings of the nations, even all of them,
Lie in glory, every one in his own house.
— Isaiah 14:18*

I

The hot wind finally began to cool down after the sun set beyond the sea.

Esther got up from the sofa to add kindling to the fireplace, then closed the window that had been open. Gazing down the hill, she sighed. "Pretty .. ."

As the calm of the night fell upon the sea, it became a pitch-black mirror. On its surface, a few thousand lights danced like spirits playing in the night. The prow lights of countless kayaks anchored at this, the only inlet to the Island of Beloved Children, twinkled.

Fertile green mountains and fields occupied the entire landscape. Quaint mountain villas dotted the spaces between the green trees. At first glance, they looked like nothing more than tranquil holiday homes. To those who didn't know the circumstances, it would be difficult to imagine that each of the structures were actually mausoleums, and that the quiet island, which floated six miles southeast of the Imperial capital, was hallowed ground to which all Imperial nobles must return.

"This island is the place to remember those who've left our world," said Astharoshe.

The mausoleum of the Marquise of Kiev's family was built at a high elevation in the center of the Island of Beloved Children.

Although the sites were referred to as mausoleums, the tombs were underground, while the portions at ground level served as pleasant lounge areas for visitors.

Aste spoke to Esther as she cleaned the photographs and plates that adorned the lounge.

"We don't have religions like you people. There is no concept of a soul. When we die, our body is buried in the ground, and returns to the Earth."

"No souls?" asked Esther.

A wide path wound between the green trees. Esther fervently watched the numerous human shapes that arrived from the inlet, strolling as they conversed under the moonlight.

"If you don't believe in the existence of souls, why do you have this kind of funeral service? Why gather on this island and stay the night?" asked Esther.

"Because our funerals aren't held for the dead. We mourn the dead for the sake of those left alive," said Astharoshe.

Perhaps because the wind strengthened, the clouds' pace hastened. Illuminated by the two moons, whose faces peeked out from between the clouds, the young Marquise of Kiev added a polite explanation. Her eyes, as she gazed at the goods that served as reminders of the dead, were unusually kind.

"Family, friends, admirers . . . Even we are sad to lose loved ones. But we must go on living; we must not stop walking. So the people left behind come to this island to remember the dead. They stroll for one whole night and speak of their memories of the dead. When day dawns, they return to the Imperial capital, to the place where the living dwell, to walk their own path again. That is our tradition," said Astharoshe.

Aste broke into a sad smile as her amber eyes stared at the back of a short person who had been gazing down at the night.

"Are you all right, Your Excellency?" Esther timidly asked the silent boy.

Although the ceremony for his grandmother was being held outside, and many acquaintances were discussing their memories of her, Ion, her grandson, couldn't take part in it.

If Aste hadn't made special plans to mix in with a party of citizens, it would've been difficult to come to the island at all. Ion's aunt and cousins, every one of the Duchess of Moldova family, were doing penance in their own territories, all of them affected by Ion's scandal. How he must have regretted that strangers were burying his grandmother, and he couldn't even watch. Esther's heart hurt thinking about the boy's feelings. But Ion showed no sign of noticing. He just stared down into the abyss. For the past few days, no matter what Esther had tried to talk about, she never got a proper answer.

Did I say something to make His Excellency angry? Esther thought. When she considered that Ion had followed her around like a puppy until a few days prior, Esther realized that he

had become an entirely different person. When she'd awoken in Seth — that strange girl's — house, he'd still been the same old Ion. It was after he'd left the house to go shopping that he'd changed. What could've happened after that?

Esther had tried to discuss the girl who'd disappeared under mysterious circumstances with Ion three times, but he'd cut it short with the excuse of being busy or engaged every time. This time he hadn't even tried to look at her. *It can't be helped, I suppose*, she said silently. *I don't know what he's sulking about, but I won't be able to stand it if he holds on to this grudge any longer.*

Putting on a forced expression of happiness, Esther said, "Your Excellency, um —"

"By the way, Marquise of Kiev," said Ion, completely ignoring Esther's attempt to speak.

Esther's attempt at concern once again ended in a complete strikeout.

Ion turned toward Aste. His face didn't show a fragment of emotion. "Have you found Radu's — I mean Baron of Luxor's — whereabouts?"

"No, not yet. I've sent my family's citizens throughout the island, but they haven't reported back yet," Astharoshe replied. "After all, this island is pretty big. Besides, tonight the nobles are scattered as they please. Count, I understand how you feel, but wait a little longer."

"There isn't any time before Her Majesty's arrival. Hadn't we better join the search, too?" asked Ion. The boy's expression wavered between impatience and irritation. Neither Esther nor Aste could ignore Ion's twitching eyes as he continued to plead. "As it stands, he'll carry it out as planned before our eyes. We have to prevent that, no matter what!"

"Will Baron of Luxor really come here?" asked Esther carefully. Ion looked as though he might explode if asked the wrong question. "If the plot Your Excellency heard is true, will he choose tonight, and this place? Would he deliberately cause an incident in the midst of so many nobles gathered here?"

"He'll do it for sure," said Ion calmly, without letting his eyes meet Esther's. "Normally, Her Majesty stays deep inside the Inner Court, and her location can't be pinpointed. But Her Majesty is conducting this funeral personally. Tonight would be the best night to guarantee her location, so he'll definitely do something tonight."

"I agree. If I were Baron of Luxor, I would probably aim for tonight," said Astharoshe, stroking her chin. "I do have doubts, however. Even supposing he succeeded in regicide, how would he escape afterward? It would be impossible to escape without being seen by this many nobles."

The Marquise of Kiev jutted her jaw toward the inlet below the hill. Now it was occupied by close to a hundred boats. Other than that inlet, there was no place where boats could land on the island, which was surrounded by sheer cliffs. After Radu committed the deed, it would be impossible to escape. Or had he always intended to sacrifice his own life?

Abel and another man entered the lounge and interrupted the discussion. "Sorry, Aste, I'm really late," he said. "Tired, so tired. I searched around thoroughly, but I could find neither hide nor hair of Baron of Luxor."

"I'm very sorry, Mistress. All of the citizens have come back, too," said Chadarli.

It was an odd couple: a tall young man wearing citizen's garb and a large white-haired old man. Abel and Chadarli, who'd led the Marquise family's citizens and taken charge of the search for Baron of Luxor, sighed in unison.

"I think it's absolutely strange that we've searched around this much and haven't found anything. Did Baron of Luxor not come to this island after all?" asked Abel.

"Are you suggesting that I'm lying, Father?" asked Ion. The boy had looked embittered for a while, but now he glared at the priest who sank to the floor, fatigued and bewildered. He threatened in a murderous voice, "You're actually saying I'm lying?"

"Huh? That's a-absurd! I'm not particularly .." Abel began as he hid, using Chadarli's huge body as a shield. But the boy only looked grimmer, as if he weren't satisfied.

Aste interrupted, as if to pacify Ion. "You'd better not throw a fit, Count of Memphis. Don't worry, Father. The Count is just a little impatient right now." She could certainly understand Ion's impatience, but she still tossed back her head in irritation.

The news that they hadn't found Radu wasn't necessarily bad. But it would be an extremely grave situation if he were hiding somewhere. More worrying was that the Empress's arrival was closing in on them while they waited.

"It can't be helped. I didn't want to cause him inconvenience, but I'm going to borrow his strength for a while," she said. All of a sudden, she snapped her fingers as though something had dawned on her. "Father, you come with me for a bit. I have an idea."

Taking her hand off her chin, she rose and walked quickly, grabbing Abel's ear as he hid behind Chadarli, and dragging him along.

"Aste, owwww! My ear hurts! Pardon me, I do have weak ears, you know," Abel moaned.

"Oh, don't be such a wimp. And stop slouching! You need to come with me now. We're going to go see Sulayman," said Astharoshe.

"The Duke of Tigris? Why, at a busy time like this?" asked Abel, blinking in surprise. He wondered what business she could have with the Second Privy Counselor.

"You imbecile, you should know that much without asking. He's in charge of this funeral service," said Astharoshe. She grasped onto the priest's ear as if it were the vilest thing she'd ever encountered and whispered, "Even though we can't find him, maybe Sulayman can locate him. Of course, because only the five people here know about Baron of Luxor's plot, we can't tell the Duke the truth. However, if we come up with some plausible excuse —"

"If it's that kind of thing, I'll go, too!" Ion replied excitedly. He'd been watching the situation dumbfounded, but finally grabbed the short sword on the table and prepared to follow Aste.

The white-haired beauty shook her head sharply. "No, Count of Memphis. You remain here. No matter what you say, you're being sought throughout the Empire as a rebel. If anybody spots you, that's the end of us."

"B-but!" said Ion, his eyes flashing like those of a pesky kitten.

Aste coldly ignored Ion's zeal. "No 'buts'! Esther, you stay here, too, because your body still isn't healed."

By the time Esther nodded, the tall beauty was leaving the room, dragging the writhing priest. The old steward also followed Aste and disappeared, leaving only the boy, the girl, and the sound of the wood burning in the fireplace.

"Ah, w-wait, Your Excellency!" said Esther. She was trying to stop Ion, who was starting off somewhere with his sword hanging at his hip. "Your Excellency, where are you going?"

Without one glance at Esther, the boy answered over his back, "To look for Radu. Her Majesty will be on the island soon. I have to find him before then."

"But Marquise of Kiev said to wait here," said Esther.

"Yes. So you should wait here," Ion replied curtly as he resumed his stride. Esther hurriedly jumped in front of him, but Ion raised his slender hand that could destroy her in an instant.

"Out of the way, Terran."

Esther reeled when Ion's hand struck her in the chest. For an instant she couldn't even breathe.

Ion peered down at the panting girl before opening his mouth. "Why are you so serious?" he asked.

Gasping like a broken whistle, Esther barely lifted her eyes. "Eh?" she murmured.

"I asked why you're getting so serious," said Ion. "Both the Empress's murder and my safety are Methuselah issues. What is the reason for you, a Terran, to be that serious? Or is it something else? Do you ..."

The boy's throat seemed to clog with emotion. Wearing a wicked smile, the first Esther had ever seen, Ion made a venomous suggestion. "Do you have some reason you want to stop me from finding Radu and preventing the Empress's murder?"

"That's ... that's..." Esther fell speechless. She was shocked at being called "Terran" by the boy for the first time since coming to the Empire, but his latter words were far more disturbing. "Is Your Excellency saying that I hope the Empress gets killed? Or that I'm hoping Baron of Luxor's plot succeeds?"

"We're vampires. To you people, we're monsters who suck blood!" said Ion. The dike that had been holding back the flood of emotion finally broke. For the first time tonight, there was a genuine expression on Ion's face. Hatred and anger seethed from his warped eyes. After twisting up his pretty lips, the boy bared his long fangs. "In your eyes, the Marquise of Kiev and I are disgusting monsters!"

"Why me?" said Esther shrilly. *I need to speak more calmly*, she thought. But because she was in shock, the right words wouldn't come out. "I-I've never thought Your Excellency is a monster!"

"Then why were you silent about Bishop Vitez!" Ion asked.

Vitez. Esther was fairly certain that when she heard that name, her expression froze. She never thought she'd hear that name come from Ion's mouth. How in the world did this boy know that name?

"I know that bishop, who was acting as your mother, was killed a year ago by Methuselahs just like me. Why didn't you tell me that?" asked Ion.

"How d-do you k-know that?" Esther asked.

There really wasn't any particular reason. She didn't think it would do any good if she did tell him. That was all. She couldn't figure out why it made the boy so angry.

"Can't you answer me? Words have failed you, have they, Terran?" Ion mocked. "Well, I won't let you do what you want. I'll stop Radu for sure. Even if it costs me my own life, I'll save the Empress's life!" With that, Ion turned on his heel.

"Your Excellency, please wait a moment!" Esther pleaded, extending her hand. But all her hand could grasp was air.

The boy's body, in haste mode, disappeared from before the girl's eyes at a speed impossible for a Terran's eyes to register. Esther ran out too, but by the time she got outside, there was no sign of the boy. Below the hill, there was only the boisterous sea, dancing madly amid the bright lights, sinking into the darkness.

Gazing down at the unpaved mountain road, Esther sighed. *Why did it come to this?* she wondered. *What in the world did I do to lose his trust?* No matter how many times she asked herself, she couldn't come up with an answer.

It seemed as though hours had passed, but in actuality, only a very short time had. Esther, who'd been staring absently at the mountain road, rubbed her eyes. People were still strolling in between the green trees. Before long, the Empress, who was the sponsor of the funeral, would arrive on the island. The nobles' shadows seemed to be walking around remembering, talking together, or enjoying a rest as they reached their respective mausoleums. The simplicity of the ritual gave Esther a sense of solemnity. It was very different from an Outer funeral.

But what caught Esther's attention wasn't the sight of the nobles resting. A short shadow was edging down a side path as if trying to avoid being seen. Esther had initially regarded the figure without any interest, but the instant the moonlight peeked out from between the clouds and lit up its white face, she gasped involuntarily.

"Impossible, that's ... Seth?" Esther exclaimed.

It was a small girl with short hair. Beneath the moonlight, her eyes, the color of new leaves, sparkled mischievously. Except for the fact that she was wearing a black citizen's uniform, she was a definite match for the girl Esther's memory.

Showing no sign of noticing Esther, the girl headed toward the back side of the island at a slow pace. Still staring at the girl, Esther gulped. Why was she here? And how did she escape unharmed from that situation?

"All right," said Esther. She was very worried about Ion, but she knew it was impossible for her to catch him in haste mode. Instead, she decided to confront the girl to find out what had happened and who she really was. Confirming by touch that the shotgun hidden beneath her uniform was still there, Esther began to descend the mountain path almost at a jog.

Because of her black clothes, it was easy for Seth's figure to melt into the darkness. Esther had to use all her senses to avoid losing sight of Seth, who was about a three hundred feet ahead.

"Where in the world does she intend to go?" asked Esther.

The winding path continued toward the back of the island. The Marquise of Kiev's mausoleum had already disappeared from sight long ago. And the inlet that had shone so brightly before had grown dim in the distance.

Seth's endurance was astonishing. Esther had confidence in her own physical strength, but she simply didn't measure up. One would think skipping steps should be more exhausting, but after all this time, Seth didn't seem a bit tired. On the contrary, Esther's energy had bottomed out.

Have I failed? Esther said silently. *Should I have looked for Ion first? Would it have been wiser to find the Marquise of Kiev or Father Nighthead, and explain the situation to them? No, maybe I should've followed orders and stayed in the mausoleum.* Pointless hesitation had become her worst enemy.

Esther noticed that girl's figure had disappeared. She visually searched through the trees, but Seth was nowhere to be seen. Something entirely different entered Esther's field of vision instead: an isolated mausoleum, hidden among the branches of the thick, black trees. Relying on the moonlight, Esther examined the family crest carved into the gatepost of the mausoleum. "The Unicorn Rampant" was the family crest of the proud Duchess of Moldova family.

"Could this be His Excellency the Count's family grave? Why would it be in a place like this?" Esther wondered aloud. There didn't seem to be any other mausoleums in the area, and there was no sign of anybody on the mountain path. Was Seth inside? Esther couldn't see any sign of anybody inside the quiet mausoleum.

It was then that a hand suddenly extended from behind and covered Esther's mouth.

"Don't move," said a hushed voice.

Esther started to scream.

"Shhh! Quiet!" said the voice in a harsh whisper.

Esther finally realized that the hand over her mouth belonged to a small, delicate person.

"You really are a bother, Sister . . . coming to a place like this," said Seth.

"Seth!" said Esther. She tried to shout her companion's name, but the girl was stronger than one would imagine. Only warm breath leaked from between the girl's soft fingers.

"I told you to be quiet, all right?" Seth said, smiling wryly. "I'll take my hand off you now, but you absolutely mustn't scream. We're in a very dangerous place now. If you value your life, be quiet."

"Good evening, Sister," said Seth. Her green eyes glistened as she smiled.

"It is you, Seth! Why are you here? And dressed like that?" asked Esther.

"Please, would you ask me questions one at a time? I'm getting confused," said Seth. With her hands still thrust in her pockets, the girl shrugged as if stumped. A small curved knife hung loosely at the hip of her functional black citizen's uniform, and a few slender darts were fastened to her wrist. That couldn't possibly be the outfit of a medical student studying at the high-class medical institution.

"It's too bad you found me. I didn't want to see you again, if at all possible," said Seth.

"You ..." said Esther. Suddenly feeling as though the smiling face before her was strange, Esther took one step backward. The tea-selling girl had been attacked by an assailant, then she disappeared like magic, and later, she loitered around here. When Esther thought about it really hard, everything about this girl was far too suspicious. Who in the world is she?

Seth smiled broadly, as if she'd read Esther's mind. "I'll answer your last question first. It's the reason for this uniform. I'm really a secret agent for a certain noble."

"Secret agent?" Esther repeated skeptically. Her face tightened.

"Your face says you don't believe me, but it's true. I can't tell you the noble's name, but my master is an Imperial noble, and a very high-ranking person at that. I was ordered by this person to investigate the so-called 'hard-liners,' so I've been going to various places. It was a part of my duty to approach you and Count of Memphis."

"Hard-liners? 'Approach'?" asked Esther. That meant they hadn't met the girl by accident. Esther appeared flabbergasted.

"It was hard work to approach you. Right after you arrived in the Imperial capital, you went missing, right? Because I knew Mimarl had made contact with the hard-liners, I thought I'd probably find you at some point if I kept watch near there. But when I did, it became a situation. My heart was really pounding," said Seth.

Esther stared, bewildered, at the girl who was talking too garrulously for a secret agent. In general, the story sounded logical, but there were too many holes in it. For one, who was the girl's master?

In the brief lull between Seth's words, Esther quickly interjected with a question. "Why are you here tonight?" she asked, biting her tongue. "This is the Duchess of Moldova's family mausoleum, isn't it? What business do you have in a place like this?"

"That's simple. Her Majesty the Empress will be here soon," Seth replied confidently.

The two girls gasped and shut their mouths after hearing a faint grating sound. They peered at the mausoleum towering under the moonlight.

"It's those guys!" Esther exclaimed, trying to stop herself from screaming.

Three human shapes emerged from the front entrance. All of them were tall. Esther was already familiar with two of them. They wore Outer-style military overcoats, along with helmets and gas masks that veiled their identity. But who was the other tall man who came out of the mausoleum? He wore the blue court uniform of a noble, and was a large, rather

majestic and dignified man. In his deeply chiseled face, eyes that burned like coals shone threateningly in the moonlight.

"Who are they?" asked Seth.

"Shhh!" ordered Esther.

The three figures left the mausoleum and descended the mountain path. Their long strides were sure-footed, even in the darkness, and they disappeared from sight almost immediately.

"Seth?" Esther called out urgently.

The girl had leapt from the shadow of the trees and sprinted toward the mausoleum as fast as a bullet. The front gate was locked, but no sooner did her nimble fingers insert a pin, moving it a few times, did the gate magically open.

"Oh, Seth ..." Esther sighed as she trailed behind.

Seth had entered the mausoleum and was glaring at something with a grim face. Esther instinctively followed the girl's gaze, gasping at what she saw: countless white sacks all over the floor.

"Impossible! It's ..." Esther cried with a tangled tongue. The nightmare following her arrival in the Imperial capital replayed vividly in her mind. That white light that had torched the Duchess of Moldova's mansion in an instant—No matter how hard she tried, she would never forget the calamitous flames of thermite napalm!

But why was this sort of stuff here? Was the great man she'd just seen one of the hard-liners plotting to kill the Empress? If so, what about Radu? Did he not intend to do it himself?

"This is no time for standing around. We h-have to inform the Marquise of Kiev a-at once!" said Esther.

"We'd better do that. The Empress will be coming here soon," said Seth. She gazed out the window at the wide ocean as she mumbled expressionlessly. The dark sea was as quiet as a ghost, but a black shadow was approaching, gliding on its quiet surface. It was an unbelievably large boat.

"That's the Empress's boat. Come, let's hurry, Sister. This place is dangerous," Seth warned. The fact that the Empress had finally arrived on the island meant there was no more time for the assassination plot. As soon as the girls hurriedly turned around, they ran outside in the dark, striking their shins on sticks and branches that obstructed their path. Even running at full speed, it would take half an hour to get to the Marquise of Kiev's mausoleum. Would they make it in time? They had to make it.

"You have to inform the Marquise of Kiev? So Astharoshe Asran is the one sheltering you?" asked a deep voice.

Esther came to a full stop. Three shadows stood before the girls, blocking their way. The great man, accompanied on either side by giants in military overcoats, stared at Esther and Seth with a calm expression on his swarthy face. "I know you're in a hurry, but can I get you to talk in a little more detail?" asked the man, who had unusually long fangs, even for a Methuselah.

The wind whipped up as the two giants, hefting their battleaxes, stomped the ground.

"Esther, run!" Seth shouted as she watched the axes prepare to descend. A loud metallic clank shook the air as Seth nimbly deflected the battleaxe with the short knife she'd unsheathed. "I'll manage here somehow. You escape quickly. Let the Marquise of Kiev know about this!"

"Who is this girl?" asked the man. For the first time, he revealed signs of uneasiness. The battleaxe, which could shatter rock, had been deflected by a tiny knife held in the most slender hand. "Impossible. This girl is a *boyar*, too?"

As the man spoke, the dainty knife gouged into the necks of the giants. Under the moonlight, two heads flew up in the night sky, trailing red sinews.

"As you can see, I'm fine, Esther. Go now!" said Seth.

"I will!" said Esther. She was shocked by the girl's unbelievable fighting strength, but came to when she was urged by Seth to move on. Nodding like a puppet, she quickly turned on her heel.

The man in blue glared at the nun's back as she ran down the mountain path. Clicking his tongue sharply, he also began to run, but a small shadow stood before him, blocking his way.

"I won't let you go!" Seth said defiantly.

The man skillfully avoided the white flash that swooped before his eyes by bending the upper half of his body. The knife thrashed twice more, seemingly at the speed of sound, but the man avoided his demise by jumping backward. But as he landed on the ground about sixty-five feet away, he noticed the chest area of his blue clothing had been slashed wide open. A thin red line of blood tickled down his exposed, muscular chest.

"Little girl!" shouted the man. A foreboding flash danced before his eyes as he saw his own blood. Shaking the cuff of his clothing, he extended an arm toward the girl. His hand wasn't holding a weapon, but a large ring with a strange luster that glistened dully under the moonlight. It seemed to be an alloy of brass and iron, and it had a twisted form. The great man's lips trembled as he held up the ring. "Die," he said.

All of a sudden, a deep hole about ten feet in diameter appeared below the girl's feet. The conical crater, which was so perfectly round that it had to have been previously plotted, wasn't born of bullet holes or anything like it. Even stranger, the interior of the crater was covered in white frost, and the earth that burst from it was also completely frozen. If Seth hadn't jumped backward, her body surely would've frozen and burst into atoms.

The girl had appeared collected until that point, but now her expression grew grim. As soon as her feet touched the ground, a second crater gaped, grazing her feet. Seth's mouth opened in the shape of a scream when she tried to jump a third time. "Argh! "The ground disappeared from behind her, revealing a steep cliff directly over the sea. "Uh-oh ..."

That moment of hesitation, when Seth had no choice but to try to change her course, was fatal. When her thin legs kicked the ground, it exploded beneath her feet. It was hard to tell whether the curdling shriek was her voice or the sound of the ground exploding. Her short figure, along with a smattering of dirt, spiraled toward the bottom of the cliff. It was about three hundred feet to the ocean's surface. Any Methuselah would have difficulty surviving such a fall.

The man's countenance was dour. "She ran that way?" he muttered as he peered at the mountain path.

The girl's figure had been swallowed by the dark forest. The dense trees served as a natural barrier, shrouding the girl's figure from the Methuselah's visual power. But it didn't take long before a pair of long fangs peeked out from the great man's mouth, indicating his confidence.

"She won't make it on time running on Terran legs. Or rather, she'll make it at the perfect time," the man snarled. He turned toward the dark, undulating sea. With his penetrating eyes, he followed the pitch-black ship that had just entered the inlet.

II

"Ugh" said Ion. He kicked a pebble at his feet, launching it into the dark ocean's surface. The sound of a light splash was audible beyond the darkness. Even he didn't know why he felt so impatient.

"I've never thought Your Excellency was a monster." The sad voice from before reverberated in Ion's eardrums and wouldn't stop. His heart grew heavier and heavier. / *don't feel particularly guilty or anything*, he thought. *Why should I feel bad for saying what I wanted to say to a Terran, of all people?* He kicked another pebble, ruffling his hair impatiently. Turning to face the ocean, he breathed deeply. *Now is no time to be thinking about that Terran girl.*

Covering his face with the hood of the citizen's uniform, Ion walked toward the pier, where many people had gathered. Several ceremonially dressed nobles and their citizens looked on, respectfully silent, as a huge shadow, about the size of a small mountain, entered the inlet.

The *Bad Hanmon*, the Imperial Navy's supreme flagship, was the vessel of the only ruler of the Empire. The massive battleship, and all of its twenty thousand tons, made contact with the pier that thrust out from the coastal wall, as if it were gliding. Upon the ship's arrival, the gangplank silently lowered from the gunwale.

A reverent sigh stirred among the nobles looking up at the short figure that appeared on the gangplank. The petite Empress quietly regarded her children of the night, her face remaining shrouded under the veil. But her supreme air of dignity radiated outward, awing the nobles.

"We've been waiting, Your Majesty," said a voice. One of the Privy Counselors, Feron Lin, Marquise of Damascus, took the hand of the Empire's ruler with a respectful bow. The Empress nodded, descended the gangplank surrounded by Privy Counselors, and began to cross the pier toward land.

The ranks of the Imperial Palace Guards lined up like a red wall on both sides of the pier. They looked suitably menacing, ensuring that as long as they were there, there was no need whatsoever to fear for the Empress's safety.

Ion knew, however, that the Imperial Palace Guards might not be completely trustworthy. Still battling impatience, Ion scanned the nobles gathered before the pier, wondering if the man he sought had disguised himself and mixed in, in the same way Ion had. For that, he was grateful that his relatives, the members of the Duchess of Moldova's family, weren't attending his grandmother's funeral. Otherwise, even if he'd disguised himself as a citizen, his identity might have been revealed sooner than later.

Where is he? Ion wondered. His eyes ceaselessly surveyed the crowd, but he couldn't find that blue-haired Methuselah anywhere. Did it mean Radu wasn't stupid enough to carry out the deed in front of this many nobles? *He must be here.* Ion wasn't so convinced because he had a low opinion of his former friend's judgment. Rather, the opposite—he knew how spot on Radu's judgment could be.

It might seem foolish to attack in the presence of so many people. However, Ion, who was the Chief Imperial Sword Bearer, knew that to attack now was the only way to bury the Empress. As long as she was shut up in the Inner Court, Radu couldn't strike at the Empress. But here...

Where is he? Where are you hiding, Radu? His thoughts growing more horrific by the second, Ion glanced at the Empress and lines of courtiers, then to the nobles gathered to pay their respects. All of a sudden, it felt as though he were hit over the head. The moment his gaze

returned to the Empress's group, he recognized the man. "R-Radu?" he said, his voice cracking.

The blue-haired man was there, but it wasn't simply his existence that shocked Ion; it was his location. Radu, of all people, was right next to the Empress! He accompanied her, standing just to the left and behind the ruler who walked deliberately along the path. His face remained stern, just like the Chief of the Palace Guards, Baybars, who walked on her right side.

"What is he doing there?" Ion gasped, frozen in shock.

The Empress's party finished crossing the pier onto land. From there, they would visit the Duchess of Moldova's family mausoleum, the place where the dead slept. The corpse that should have been sent there had been badly burned in the mansion fire. It was because of that horrid cause of death that the Empress walked downcast, respectfully carrying Mirka's remains in an urn.

Think . . . think, Ion! Ion desperately tried to think, despite his panic-stricken mind. / don't know by what circumstances he's there. I don't know, but as things stand, the Empress's life is in his hands. He could break her like an egg in his fist with the slightest wave of his hand. What should I do?

Since being informed of the assassination plot, Ion had reviewed various means of attack with the Marquise of Kiev, and had practiced countermeasures against them. They discussed an attack from a sniper, an explosion, and poisoning, but it was beyond their comprehension that Radu would try something so reckless right in front of the Empress.

Ion, desperately trying to think, returned his gaze to the group. Little did he know, bronze eyes were boring through him. There were about a hundred and fifty feet and throngs of people between Ion and the ranks of the Empress's party. Even with a Methuselah's eyesight, it would have been difficult to pinpoint the boy's face in the crowd. Nevertheless, Radu's eyes had made contact with Ion's.

Smirking, Radu mouthed the words, "We will kill the Empress."

Ion heard the message clearly, just as he had that night on the eastern coast. "Radu!" Ion cried, instantly losing all reason. Without hesitation, the boy kicked the ground and jumped across the ranks of citizens, darting toward the Empress's party.

It was Baybars who first noticed the shadow descending upon the Empress's entourage with the swiftness of a peregrine falcon aiming for its prey. "Count of Memphis?" he said. "Out of the way, Baron of Luxor!" By the time he stepped forward to push Radu out of the way, the Chief of the Palace Guards was drawing his favorite sword from his back.

But Ion's shadow disappeared like a mirage. Brushing past the drawn seven-pronged sword that whirled around, he landed on Baybars' back, raising his short sword. "Radu, you traitor!"

With an evil roar, the naked blade gleamed as it arced through space. Radu's smile remained fixed as he gazed at the dangerous weapon closing in on him. To Ion's surprise, Radu took one step toward the dangerous weapon as it twisted upward, placing himself directly in front of the blade.

Ion's eyes bulged as his sword stopped directly before Radu's eyes. The blue-haired Methuselah clapped his hands around the naked blade just as it skimmed his eyelashes. But he didn't give Ion time to contemplate the exquisite sword-catching trick. The short sword still frozen, Radu lifted his left arm with a smooth swoop.

"Ugh!" moaned Ion. Kicked in the pit of his stomach, Ion's body flew far, rolling near the rows of roadside Terrans. If he hadn't summoned the strength in his abdomen, his body would have been broken in two. The blood flow from his shattered stomach lining caused

violent nausea and made his gorge rise. Still unable to stand up, the boy doubled over and vomited red goop.

"Sorry, Ion," Radu whispered sarcastically.

When Ion glanced up, Radu was standing right next to him. The attacker's voice was quiet as he stood with Ion's sword in his hand: But Ion had never heard him so clearly. "With this, you've turned yourself into a traitor. Now you will kill the Empress," Radu said with his mind.

"What?" asked Ion. Without wiping off the filth that clung to his mouth, Ion looked up with weak eyes at his former friend. *What does he mean?* Although short of breath from his windpipe being half-clogged with vomit, he asked, "Radu, what in the world are you —"

"Oops, no more talking," said Radu, dodging the boy's question. Radu put on a serious face and brandished the sparking weapon over his head. "You will die as the Empress's assassin. Meanwhile, in order to protect Her Majesty the Empress, I will take care of you with my own hands. Old friend, it's time to say goodbye. Doesn't it make you want to cry?"

Ion's face twisted at Radu's mocking voice. *Will I be killed here? By the hand of the man I used to believe was my friend? Is this it?*

The naked blade flashed under the light of the two moons that floated in the southern sky. The sword thrust down forcefully. Darkness covered Ion, but both shock and pain were absent, and death showed no signs of arrival.

Timidly opening his eyes, Ion wondered, *Why am I alive?* He couldn't understand why Radu's sword hadn't pierced his body. The answer to that was before his eyes. Still holding the sword downward, Radu's body was frozen stiff. His face was warped in agony, and his hands, faintly trembling, appeared as though they were on the verge of breaking.

"I ... on," said Radu.

The quiet voice struck Ion's ears, as his face grew tense with suspicion.

"Run ... I ... on," Radu repeated.

Was this the same person who was brimming with evil self-confidence moments earlier?

' His face dripping with greasy sweat, the blue-haired traitor squeaked out a voice. "Run . . . Stop Her Majesty. This is a trap."

"Trap?" asked Ion. Forgetting to run away, he stared at his old friend who had changed completely. Where at first Radu seemed triumphant over his certain victory, now he was telling Ion to run. Was he taunting him? Or was this some kind of trick?

Radu's lips trembled as he tried to speak. "They... The Orden was mistaken... About what I was thinking... Terrible... They —"

<That's enough talk, Flanberg.>

A beautiful, but hostile, voice broke in.

<I know you're worried about your friend, but I need you to stop. *You're already dead.* A regretful man is pitiful.>

"Ion, run . . . escape!" It was Radu, holding the sword high over his head, who spoke in two opposing voices as Ion looked on in disbelief.

"Radu, wh-what in the world are you?" asked Ion.

A strange light wavered in Radu's eyes. "Ion, sorry. I ... failed —"

<I thought I told you to knock it off!>

As the irate voice spoke, Radu's eyelids fell as though some switch had been cut off. When he opened them again, the light that had been shining in them had disappeared as if lacking electricity.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Count of Memphis," said Radu. His tortured expression was all but gone. Wearing his standard sarcastic smile, Radu pointed the sword at the boy's heart. "It would be a problem if you were captured alive, so I'll have you die here."

A moment later, the explosive sound of gunpowder roared. "Your Excellency the Count!" shouted Esther. Nine shots fired from the sawed-off shotgun hit Radu's short sword. The white blade burst into fragments of light, causing Baron of Luxor to stumble backward holding his wounded shoulder in agony.

"Please run, Your Excellency!" said Esther as she packed the second volley into the chamber. She fixed her aim on the Methuselah, his blue hair fluttering, when out of nowhere, a strong force grabbed the gun from her hands.

Baybars, who'd taken the shotgun from Esther, firmly thrust its barrel at her neck. "Coward," he mocked.

"Esther!" cried Ion as he watched his companion's body be thrown to the ground. Of course, if Baybars had been serious, he would've broken the Terran's slender neck. But Ion didn't have time to ponder what-ifs. Half-dazed, he pushed up his body and tried to run to her. "Esther! Esther! "Unfortunately, a miraculously timed sweep to his feet made Ion hit the dirt.

"Worry about yourself before you worry about other people, Count of Memphis," said Radu. With his left foot on Ion's leg, treading on the fallen boy's back, Radu cracked a thin smile. Throwing away the short sword, he waved his hand in the air. The blue- white sheen of raw napalm filled the air.

"Come, it's time for the traitor to leave," said Radu. His weight still on Ion's back, as the boy twisted in pain and despair, the Efreet gripped the fire in his fist that reached three thousand degrees. "You should die as miserably as possible. I hope you gnash your teeth at your own powerlessness."

The brightness of the flames dyed Ion's face a faint blue color. Their searing heat only added to the Methuselah's uncanny strength. If Ion were hit directly, nothing would remain of the boy but ash. Miraculously, Radu's fist stopped a few centimeters shy of Ion's horrified face.

<Wait, Baron of Luxor. You must not kill him.>

The burning hand immediately lowered before Ion's eyes. A small shadow had stepped between the two nobles and had grasped Radu's arm.

"Your Majesty, it's dangerous. Please withdraw!" Baybars pleaded. He'd left he unconscious Esther to the Ienichieri.

The girl in green didn't budge. She just stared through her veil at the boy writhing on the ground. <Ion Fortuna, Count of Memphis. There are many things I need to ask this person, particularly concerning that Terran there. Until I have done that, you must not kill him.>

"But, Your Majesty," said Radu. When he lifted his head discontentedly, he noticed the Empress peering into his face.

<But what?> There was no emotion in the modulated voice, and there was no way to guess her expression, shrouded by the veil. Still, it was hard to deny the frosty air about her. <I said you must not kill him. Are you dissatisfied with that, Baron?>

"No. Do as you will," Radu replied, bowing deeply.

The Empress turned on her heel as if she'd suddenly lost interest in the two assassins, and in the assassination plot itself. <Then, lords, let us continue the mourning ceremony. There isn't much time until dawn. Baybars, I'm entrusting those two to you. After we've taken them back to the Celestial Imperial Palace, confine them until you receive instruction from me.>

"Very well," said Baybars. He neglected to look at the Chief of the Palace Guards as he placed his hand over his heart and bowed.

Without further adieu, the Empress resettled into the ranks of her entourage. There really wasn't much time left before dawn. Considering the time it would take to go to the mausoleum, and for the Empress to enshrine the remains of the departed, the schedule was tight. Because of the urgency, nobody noticed that the blue-haired Methuselah had been left behind in the confusion, watching the scores of attendants leave with a wicked smile.

III

"It's quite noisy outside," said Astharoshe serenely as she gazed at the waves crashing below the window. Having called at the Duke of Tigris's family mausoleum, she had already spent close to half an hour being entertained in the grand reception hall. And the building's owner still showed no sign of appearing.

Because the owner was acting as chief mourner, this building seemed to have become the funeral's makeshift management headquarters. The mansion's interior bustled, and the sound of private citizens walking quickly could be heard everywhere.

Standing next to the sofa, Abel commented, "It does seem busy. Are we in the way?"

"No, that's not what I meant," said Astharoshe. Trying to sniff out something in the night air, Aste pointed her well-turned nose upward. She smelled something burning but couldn't detect what it was.

The Duke of Tigris's family mausoleum was on the opposite side of the island from the Marquise of Kiev's. Because the inlet where the Empress would arrive was over the hill, there was no way to see it from where she stood.

"The Duke of Tigris is keeping us waiting," noted Astharoshe. *Calm down*, she told herself. As her heartbeat accelerated due to a bad premonition, she put the previously warm milk on the table to her mouth, drinking it down in one gulp. "I wonder if Count of Memphis is behaving himself right now? It's fine to be assertive, but I'm a little worried, because that brat is short-tempered."

"You do know people well, don't you?" said Abel.

"What did you say?" asked Astharoshe. She shot him a dangerous look, but Abel shrugged and looked off into the distance.

Picking his nose, he asked back casually, "Well, Esther's with him, so there's no need to worry, right? That girl is sturdy for her age. They'll be fine if you leave them alone."

"It's true Esther is strong for a Terran, but that's just it. It's rare for an Outer Terran girl, especially a nun from the Vatican, to be that unafraid of us," said Astharoshe.

Abel finally stopped picking his nose. "Well, she's had to overcome all kinds of things." Looking agreeable, he added, "Until now, she's been an unwavering; stubborn person. She's still a bit inexperienced, but I think there's no harm in trusting her."

"Hmmm. You trust that girl a lot, don't you?" asked Astharoshe. She gave a restrained, wry smile in response to the priest's face, which resembled that of a father who was proud of his daughter. She opened her mouth, about to tease him about something, but then suddenly closed it. The guest room door opened one beat later, and a very tall figure came into the room.

"Very sorry for keeping you waiting," said Sulayman. The great man with the swarthy face—Sulayman, Duke of Tigris— traversed the room with a broad stride, saw Aste's face, and smiled sociably. "I'm busy tonight. I haven't hurt your feelings, have I, Marquise of Kiev?"

Aste was stiff and formal as she quickly rose. "Of course not! I'm sorry for having to impose on you when you're busy," she said. "Please forgive my rudeness, but it's an emergency. The truth is, danger threatens Her Majesty the Empress. We came to tell you that."

"Her Majesty? That's a very disconcerting thing to say," said Sulayman. His countenance hardened at the very mention of the Empress's name, his razor-sharp eyes honing in on Aste's face. While gesturing for his guests to sit down, the Imperial Second Privy Counselor questioned the Directly Reporting Chief Inspector. "Is this accurate information, princess?"

"Yes," said Astharoshe. She spoke as if she were telling a lie she'd rehearsed many times. "My citizen, Abel Nightroad, here, saw Count of Memphis on this island. That time, the Count was dressed as a citizen."

"Count of Memphis? Is that true, Citizen Abel?" Sulayman asked.

"Yes. I-I swear it's true," said Abel. He released a timid sigh as he held his hand against his heart. "It was a little while ago—about an hour, I believe—when I went down to the beach on my mistress's orders. It was then that I saw a short citizen. I glanced at his face as we passed each other, and was surprised to find that it was unmistakably Count of Memphis. Oh, and the citizen's uniform belonged to the Baron of Luxor's family."

"Baron of Luxor, you say?" said Sulayman, unable to hide his surprise as his elliptical eyes opened wide.

Aste began to suffer from inner turmoil. She had written this scenario of lies. But with this, she should be able to find out whether or not Radu was on the island, and ascertain his whereabouts. "So, Duke of Tigris ..." Cautious not to let her guilty conscience show on her face, Aste picked up the story before Abel could give them away "... where is Baron of Luxor now? Because Count of Memphis is pretending to be a citizen belonging to his family, do you think we can get his help to search for him?"

"I asked the Baron to attend to Her Majesty," said Sulayman. His hand still on his chin, Duke of Tigris continued, "I'll send someone at once to summon him here. He should explain why Count of Memphis is on this island, pretending to be his citizen."

"Alternatively, we could go to the Baron. That would be the fastest way." Without waiting for an answer, Aste stood up and nodded. The blood in her face had gone from what Sulayman had said: "I asked the Baron to accompany Her Majesty." Of all people, the assassin was by Her Majesty's side. Suppressing the impulse to run, Aste did her best to explain away her hastiness with a plausible excuse. "We'll come back with the Baron right away, so please wait here, Your Excellency. Let's go, Abel!"

A contrastingly calm voice stopped her as she stood up hurriedly. "Please wait, Marquise of Kiev. There's one thing I'd like to confirm," said Sulayman, rubbing his ring as he sat on the sofa. "Citizen Abel, when you saw Count of Memphis, was he alone? According to the Palace Guards' report, two Terrans, a man and a woman, were accompanying him."

"Terrans? No, I didn't see any. Although maybe I just didn't notice that they were nearby," said Abel.

"Even the girl?" asked Sulayman.

"Urn, yes. Eh?" Abel replied. At first, he was nodding as affably as ever, but all of a sudden, his face froze.

In the Palace Guards' report, two Terrans, a man and a woman, had accompanied Count of Memphis. But how did he know that one of them was a girl?

Astharoshe turned to face Sulayman. "Duke of Tigris, y-you — "

"Look out, Aste!" Abel shouted. The lanky priest suddenly pushed Aste's body down before she could ask. If he'd been a half second later, her life would have ended at that

instant. Some unknown force grazed the air where her head had been, continuing until they could hear the sound of the wall crumbling behind them.

"What the . . . ?" Aste twirled around to find a big hole had been gouged into the wall. Its diameter was at least ten feet. The perimeter of the hole, a circle so perfect it looked as though it were cut from a pattern, was powdered in white frost. Frozen air rose from the opening like steam.

While examining the hole, Aste felt her body lift into the air as Abel carried her off. Deep holes formed one after the other at Abel's feet as he leapt back, still carrying Aste's body. The invisible menace trailing Abel pursued the pair to the edge of the wall.

Sulayman stood up from the sofa with studied calmness. "Marquise of Kiev, I wanted you, a true 'Terran-lover,' to play the role of villain in the event that this plot failed. You would be the evil one who colluded with the Vatican and assassinated the Empress with Count of Memphis. I would be the one to discover that, and impeach you before the lords. That was my plot."

The Ring of Solomon, with its uncanny design that combined an alloy of iron and brass into two spirals, shone on Sulayman's right hand. While fixing the aim of the "device" that had been passed down among the Duke of Tigris family on the beautiful woman and priest, the Second Privy Counselor shook his head regretfully. "The world is full of vexations. The truth is, a little while ago, I discovered that girl in a rather uninviting situation."

It wasn't Aste's expression that tightened at Sulayman's admission. Holding her, Abel went pale and began to tremble. "E-Esther? Impossible, D-Duke of Tigris . . . You, to her . . ."

"Ahhh, don't worry, Citizen Abel. There was an unforeseeable interference, and she got away. Thanks to that, I had to rewrite the scenario like this," said Sulayman, keeping the sparkling ring on his finger pointed straight at them.

The Ring of Solomon, handed down in the Duke of Tigris's family for generations, was a device that shot infinitesimal magnetic fields at high speed. The discharged magnetic fields rapidly lower their internal pressure as they approach their target, until a lump of air sealed into the magnetic field expands, creating the most basic physical phenomenon, adiabatic expansion. The sudden lowering of air pressure instantaneously freezes the air inside the magnetic field, and the explosive inflow of air resulting from the low air pressure slices the fragile intermolecular union, leading to destruction of the target in one blow. It could pulverize steel to atomic level. Needless to say, not even a scrap of a fragile human body would remain.

"Well, I think I'd better leave the chitchat at that. If we affect the time of the opening curtain too much, it might alter the main event. Ah, don't move, Marquise of Kiev," said Sulayman. He noticed that she had stealthily reached for the spear hanging at her hip. "As for my ring, Marquise of Kiev, you should know it well. The Spear of Gei Borg is an excellent weapon, but it certainly isn't any match for this. Be brave and give up."

Sulayman's tone wasn't self-assured, like that of somebody who was certain of victory. The fact that he didn't summon one of his citizens meant that either he was going to deal with the two of them secretly, or that he was confident enough in their difference in strength. He narrowed his eyes slightly as he held up the ring, which began to flicker again.

"We've gotten a little behind schedule, but it's fine. I'll ask you to leave the stage now. After I found out about the plot to assassinate the Empress, I killed a miserable would-be avenger who tried to silence me. It's a shame it's a common plot. I hope you'll forgive me," said Sulayman.

Aste's confidence in avoiding the next attack was little to none. In an attempt to buy time, she said in a trembling voice, "I-I want to ask you something, Duke of Tigris. Why are you, the highest noble in this Empire, involved in this kind of rebellious plot?"

"Even if I explain, a young person like you wouldn't understand, princess," said Sulayman. There was a bitter tinge to his voice. His face suddenly appeared aged beyond his years, which numbered in the thirties at most if he were a Terran. "I've lived in this Empire for close to three hundred years beside Her Majesty, the great Empress. But there's no way you could understand how that was every day. She is too great, too mighty. She sees everything."

"Great? We respect her because she is great! What harm is there in that?" asked Ashtaroshe. Sulayman offered a sour smile. "Yes, it's good that she is great. But the problem is, she is too great. And I found out..." His voiced sounded pained as grasped the air. "... She ... she is not a person who belongs in this world."

"What?" asked Ashtaroshe. "*Not a person who belongs in this world?*" she thought to herself, frowning at the mysterious words. "What does that mean, Duke of Tigris?"

"Hmmm, it seems I've said a little too much," said Sulayman. Laughing as if scolding himself, the previous look of bloodthirstiness returned to Sulayman's eyes. The Duke of Tigris raised one cheek as he pointed the pulsating ring at Aste and the priest holding her. "I won't miss this time, Marquise of Kiev. I have no grudge against you, but I want you to die quietly."

What happened the moment before the ring flashed was completely unexpected to the Methuselahs involved in the standoff.

"Hold on, Aste!" said Abel. Previously ignored by the two Methuselahs, the silver-haired young man suddenly began to run like a rabbit, still holding Aste. But he wasn't running away from the ring; he was running toward Sulayman, who held the ring aloft.

"What?" Sulayman gasped.

"Aste, the spear!" said Abel.

Sulayman hesitated to fire the ring, and the young man, darting on his spindly legs, passed by Sulayman's side with unexpected swiftness. Behind Sulayman was a large window that faced the night sea.

"Argh!" Sulayman grumbled.

Suddenly, a burst of red light shot from the white-haired beauty's hand and completely shattered the glass. The glistening shards plunged toward the sea, revolving under the moonlight on their descent. Then, the young man holding the woman jumped as if chasing the broken glass.

"No!" Sulayman shouted. By the time he ran to the window, a tall pillar of water was rising on the ocean's surface. He used his Methuselah sight to scan the surface of the dark ocean, but he couldn't find two human forms anywhere. Did they dive deep into the sea?

"Hmph, they got away," said Sulayman, miffed. He figured that the white-haired man would perish but that Aste, a Methuselah, probably wouldn't have died after jumping from such a height. Still, he had to acknowledge failure. "Well, fine. What can one little girl do anyway?"

A faint smile swept over the swarthy face of the man who'd become the greatest noble in the Empire, now that the Duchess of Moldova was dead. His smile widened. *Yes, the plan is already entering its final stages. Who can stop it now?*

Empress of the Night

*And Adorn lived a hundred and thirty years,
and begat a son in his own likeness, and after his image;
and called his name Seth
– Genesis 5:3*

I

Fully armed citizens were passing by the "Fountain of p Criminals." Likely some nobles' private citizens, their faces were pale with stress as they passed through the main gate of the Outer Court.

It was already seventeen hundred hours, but the sky was the same as if the sun had just risen from beyond the horizon. Typically at this hour, the Celestial Imperial Palace would've fallen silent. But for some reason, this morning, the sound of armor and swords clanking resounded. This was the day when all the lords residing in Imperial territory were in attendance. A very observant person would have noticed nobles with anxious expressions inhabiting the Outer Court, conversing privately about the greatest disaster since the founding of the Empire.

The disaster that occurred the previous evening was the assassination of the Empress by a traitor, someone abetted by the Vatican. The murderer had blown up the Empress along with the Duchess of Moldova's family mausoleum when she'd entered it.

The only thing that could console the lords was the fact that just before the accident, the ringleader of the incident, Ion Fortuna, Count of Memphis, and a Terran girl of unknown origin, had been captured by the Palace Guards. However, despite the authorities' desperate search, they had not yet caught their apparent co-conspirators, Ashtaroshe Asran, Marquise of Kiev, and another Terran, who had quickly disappeared. In actuality, not that many people knew about the situation.

The Terran district had been placed under martial law, and was still quiet. Its citizens were unaware of what had happened, but if the truth were to leak out, the scene would turn into an uproar. Even most of the nobles assembling in the Celestial Imperial Palace would've gone about their usual business had the State Secrets Institution not issued an edict to convene in two hours.

"You don't look too well, Your Excellency the Duke," said Radu. Wearing a kind smile that always made other people uneasy, the blue-haired young man looked into the Second Privy Counselor's face. "Are you feeling ill?"

"No, it's nothing. I just think it's strange," said Sulayman, glancing up from the Outer Court at the worried voice. After he drew the curtain, he looked back at the young man standing in front of the desk. "Someone who's always been there since I was born has suddenly disappeared. I can't seem to calm down." Sulayman's eyes as he laughed weren't those of a man who'd attained his ambitions. Rather, they were the eyes of a child who had strayed from his mother. "It's stupid sentimentality. But you probably don't understand, because you're still young. For as long as I can remember, close to three hundred years—no, even longer—someone who's existed, unchanging, since the founding of the Empire, doesn't exist this morning. So I can't be calm."

"That's something you'll just have to get used to," said Radu. The young Methuselah's answer to the great man's lamentation was far too casual. Staring at the Second Privy Counselor with smoky eyes, he added dryly, "I'm sorry, but her existence was harmful to the Empire. Not merely avoiding war with the Outer, but planning for appeasement and so forth, can only be called irresponsible. Between us Methuselahs and the Terrans, there is

subjugation and subordination. If we don't have that, then we only have death. Coexistence is absolutely not feasible. Isn't that why Your Excellency dared to stand against it?"

"Yes," said Sulayman, lowering his eyes. Decisiveness and hesitation, relief and regret all crossed his handsome face at once. Countless shades of emotion vied with each other. But when his black eyes opened again, a spark of volition turned them the color of red-hot steel. "I can't go back now. Now that Her Majesty and the Duchess of Moldova are dead, there is nobody to lead this nation except me. For the sake of all Methuselahs, I can't stop walking. Radu?"

"Yes!" Radu answered.

The Second Privy Counselor penetrated the eyes of the young man who suddenly straightened up. "Those two people, Count of Memphis and the Terran girl, where are they now?"

"After they were taken from Her Majesty the Empress by the Ienichieri, they were imprisoned in the underground dungeon. That's the situation. We still haven't begun to interrogate them," said Radu.

"Hmmm," said Sulayman as he laced his fingers under his chin.

Last night, he'd expected that person to shoulder all of the blame for assassinating the Empress. Radu killing them on the spot of the attack, or strategically blaming the Vatican's participation afterward — that hadn't happened, because Baybars and the Empress herself had interfered.

"It isn't good for those two to be alive, imprisoned in this castle, for reasons other than the escape of the Marquise of Kiev and the other Terran," said Sulayman.

They couldn't do anything about the Marquise of Kiev. Due to Sulayman's indictment, the State Secrets Institution had named Astharoshe Asran and Count of Memphis as accomplices throughout Imperial territory. Aste didn't seem to have returned to the capital and was probably hiding somewhere, but her discovery would only be a matter of time. The only thing that worried Sulayman was if she managed to return and counter-indict him in the presence of the lords. But the Celestial Imperial Palace was currently under strict watch; so re-entering should prove impossible. In that sense, there was no difference if she lived or died.

"It's very problematic that Count of Memphis and she are alive. The Privy Counselors will certainly question them and investigate the truth about the Empress's assassination. It would be bad if we let them talk. Of course there's no proof; it has to do with the nobles' impressions," said Sulayman.

"Right now, you don't want the lords to have doubts. Is that what you're saying?" asked Radu. He let out a low chuckle, but he tweaked his expression upon seeing Sulayman's dissatisfied face. Standing up straight, he took on a more respectful tone. "They can't make dead people say anything, so let's get rid of them. If we do, you'll have peace of mind, right?"

"I want to avoid putting a hand on those two right now. This palace is completely isolated from the outside. If they're killed by somebody during a time like that, the Privy Counselors will begin to suspect insiders," said Sulayman.

A meaningful light illuminated the Efrete's eyes. Looking down at the Second Privy Counselor's rather suspicious face, Radu smiled. "If they *were killed*, it certainly might be suspicious. But what if those two killed each other? If they take each other's lives, there should be no problem."

"Do you have some plan, Baron?" asked Sulayman.

"Of course! Please leave it to me. I'll show you how we can deal with those two without getting our hands dirty," said Radu. Brimming with self-confidence, the Efreet elegantly turned on his heel. "I'll take the dirty work. Meanwhile, please get your hands on the throne, Your Majesty."

"Ugh!" said Esther. Despite putting her whole body's strength into it, she couldn't budge the shining, gold-colored lattice.

The density of the amorphous composite aluminum equaled three thousand mega-Pascals. Even if Esther had been a Methuselah, it would have been impossible for her to wrench off the super-hard alloy, thirty times the density of steel.

"UNNNNNNNNNGH. Ahhh, this is no use," said Esther. If she tried any longer, the wound on her shoulder would reopen. After trying eight times, Esther finally let go of the latticework door. She sank down and sighed deeply.

The brightly lit white interior of the room was about three times as big as her bedroom at the nunnery. The dry atmosphere maintained a suitable temperature. There was no window, but there also wasn't one speck of dust within the room, which was the picture of cleanliness. If not for the clumsy lattice fitted in for a door, she could even live here.

After lowering her gaze from the ceiling, which didn't even have a ventilation port, Esther turned around to the boy who had remained silent. She timidly put a hand on his back, as he sat, rounded, holding his knees. "Um, how are you, Your Excellency?" she asked. "Please don't be so depressed. It can't be helped. We tried our best. The Empress's assassination couldn't be avoided."

"Everything is my fault," said Ion. Last night's aura of hatred had dissipated from his face, but now, his head hung so low it looked as if it might break. The crestfallen boy's voice was barely audible. "If I'd listened to your warning . . . I'm sorry, Esther. Everything is my fault. My stupid behavior even got you involved!" His eyes glistened with repentance and regret. With her hand still on Ion's back, Esther quietly shook her head, wearing a wry smile. Her eyes revealed that she didn't know how to give up on saving the soul of her companion. "A long time ago, when I was very depressed, somebody said to me that 'rather than lament your own powerlessness, do what you can.' It sounds very heady, and when I think about it now, I feel nauseous, you know? But what he said was right. Rather than regret something you can't change, let's think of a way to escape from here. That would be more constructive." The nun's voice was kind, but firm. "You're strong, aren't you, Esther?" said Ion. He regarded Esther, who'd begun to push and pull at the lattice again, as if he were looking up at something dazzling. The first sign of spirit swept across his face. "Why do you try so hard to encourage me like that? I'm a Methuselah. Don't you hate Methuselchs, who killed your family?"

"But it wasn't Your Excellency who killed the Bishop and everybody else," said Esther. She had absolutely no idea what material that white wall was made of. As she tapped around on it with the back of her hand, she shrugged. "Besides, just as there are many kinds of Terrans, there must be all kinds of Methuselchs. Whether Terran or Methuselah, good people are good, and bad people are bad. Isn't it wrong to lump people together as Terrans or Methuselchs? Although, I'm not very wise, so I don't really understand."

"No, you're a wise girl, Esther," said Ion, smiling for the first time since last night. He spoke carefully, gazing lovingly at the girl, her hair grungy with blood and dust and sweat, and her face filthy, and without any makeup. "After all, you — "

"Hey, the two of you look fine," said Radu enthusiastically. The young man stood beyond the lattice door. From beneath his blue hair, bronze eyes gazed at the boy and girl, as if looking at something charming.

"Y-you, Radu?" said Ion. His face looked grim, like a completely different person's. Grabbing the lattice, he bared his fangs and roared. "How dare you appear before me, you cad!"

"Hey, hey, don't say awful things, Ion," said Radu. With the same eerie smile still pasted on, Radu deliberately looked up at the ceiling. "You shouldn't call your childhood friend a cad when he's willingly come to a place like this to visit you, should you? Although I'm sorry I interfered during the time you're enjoying with that girl."

The barb embedded in the mocking words didn't seem to reach the boy's ears, carried away by anger as he was. The joints in Ion's hands turned white as he gripped the lattice. "Radu, do you know what you've done? You . . . You murdered Her Majesty!"

"It couldn't be helped. Anyway, it was on a certain person's orders. Sulayman, Duke of Tigris. He's the leader of us hard-liners. An underling like me could do nothing but obey," said Radu.

"Duke of Tigris?" said Ion. The Second Privy Counselor's face froze when he heard the name of the greatest noble in the Empire after his grandmother. "S-so he's the one pulling your strings!"

"And all of the vampires called hard-liners. Yes, Ion, *Tovarisch*. He used you," said Radu. The young man shrugged as if he'd cracked a joke. Ultimately, he decided to tell Ion the truth. "After I blundered in Carthage, Duke of Tigris used your return to the Empire and decided to enact his plan to usurp the throne. He would kill the Empress, putting all of the blame on you and the Vatican. He first killed the Chief Privy Counselor, because she was popular and therefore in his way, but also to prevent you from contacting the Empress. You've been dancing in our hands from the start, Ion."

Ion, who had gone pale, reeled at the sadistic words. If Esther hadn't supported him, he might have collapsed right there. Yet the boy, who barely managed to stand, glared at his former friend with bloodshot eyes. "Radu, why in the world did you go that far? Why have you fallen so low? You, who were so proud. How could you do this kind of thing?"

"Radu? Oh, now that you mention it, I still haven't introduced myself to Your Excellency the Count. I'm not Radu. It's unpleasant to be mistaken for such a people-pleasing coward," said the man.

"What?" asked Ion, his face twisted in suspicion. He stared at the Baron, who'd spoken so mysteriously, as though he were looking at a strange creature. "What are you saying, Radu? What in the world are you —"

"Your Excellency, he's telling the truth. He's not Baron of Luxor," said Esther in a respectful but certain tone. "If he were an Imperial noble, he absolutely wouldn't refer to his group as vampires. Who are you? You're absolutely not Baron of Luxor. You're —"

"As discerning as ever," said "Radu." The young man smiled, peering into the girl's face as she felt an ominous premonition coming on. "After all, you're the best, Esther . . . including that *halfway good head*"

"Halfway good head" — those words jogged Esther's memory. She'd been given that exact same valuation, in the same words. *How could I forget? That cold underground tunnel*, she thought to herself. "Dietrich?" she said.

"Correct answer! I'm glad you remember me," said Puppeteer. The Methuselah's face looked just like Radu's as he nodded happily. "You've completely neglected to write. Have you been well, Star?"

For the first time since entering the cell, Esther had lost her composure. Carried away by fear and shock, she involuntarily slid backward. Ion, who still hadn't wrapped his head around the situation, peered into her face, which looked as though she'd just met the devil.

"Wh-what's the matter, Esther?" Ion asked. "What does this mean? What is Radu — "

"You're very slow to understand. Didn't she just tell you? I'm *not* Radu," said Puppeteer. Perhaps displeased that he'd bowed at the waist to apologize, Radu — or the person pretending to be him — shot daggers from his eyes as he stared at Ion. "My name is Dietrich von Lohengrin. Rosenkreuz Orden level 8=3, code name Puppeteer. I'm simply borrowing your friend's body for a little while. His corpse, rather. Radu Barvon, who was your friend, died a long time ago. I'm using his repaired corpse. Yes, just like a puppet show!"

After "Radu" explained the situation in one breath and gave an exaggerated shrug, he winked like it was all a joke. His movements were so smooth, they didn't seem at all like those of a corpse. However, his clownish behavior was absolutely not that of Radu, who was too serious.

"Puppet... show?" asked Ion blankly. *Then, that time — his strange behavior on the Island of Beloved Children . . .* "D-damn you!" A high-pitched metallic noise, mixed with a ferocious roar, echoed. Ion threw his body against the lattice with explosive force, and thrust his arms through its gaps. "I won't forgive you! I absolutely won't forgive you!"

"Uh-oh. Your Excellency the Count has a very hasty temper. Esther, this boy is like you. His short temper is just like you," said Puppeteer.

Ion shook the lattice and shouted, but his long talons barely scraped his opponent's blue clothing. The smiling face of the young man staring down at him was completely at ease.

"Besides, you enjoy this kind of useless effort. Somehow, I'm worried you might be enjoying it too much," said Puppeteer.

As if he didn't hear the young man's mocking, Ion violently shook the lattice again and howled. His sharp fangs were making a high-pitched screech, as if greedy for blood. "I'll kill you!" he said. "I'll kill you two hundred times. How dare you do such a terrible thing to my friend!"

"Terrible thing?" asked Puppeteer. Sneering at the boy's rage, Dietrich crossed his arms very casually. "It's no use saying it's so terrible, because I came here to do an even more terrible thing."

Dietrich raised his arm as he laughed mockingly. By the time Esther noticed the faint sparkle inside his sleeve and pushed Ion down, it was already too late. A sharp sparkle had blasted from Puppeteer's sleeve following the sound of compressed air.

The flechette fired from the miniature needle gun drilled into the pit of Ion's stomach and split into thousands of tiny needles inside his body.

Ion's body doubled over and then collapsed face up. The scattered needles were shredding his blood vessels to ribbons. Black blood gushed out of control, creating a strange pattern on the floor.

"Your Excellency!" said Esther. Running to Ion with a high-pitched scream, Esther held him as he repeatedly twitched. But his face had already changed to the color of paper, and only thin, rough breathing leaked from his mouth, which hung open. "Your Excellency, hang on. Please hang on!"

"You needn't be so upset, Esther. He's a vampire, right? He won't die from that much," said Puppeteer.

As Dietrich pointed out with a devilish smile, Ion's wound, which would be fatal to a Terran, was well within the tolerable range for a Methuselah—or more accurately, to the

Bacillus Kudrak in a Methuselah's body. Because the projectiles passed through the liver, where the blood vessels of the internal organs were concentrated, a large quantity of blood loss could not be avoided; but in two or three hours, not even a scar should remain.

Ion surveyed his wound, shaking his head worriedly. Watching his blood continue to hemorrhage, his eyes widened as if he'd witnessed something unspeakably frightening. "Blood . . . My blood ... Oh, no!"

The bacillus had sensed its host's wound, and was already beginning to activate. Blocking the damaged area instead of platelets, they prevented infection by preying on bacteria invading from outside. But as Dietrich pointed out, this wouldn't endanger Ion's life. He should recover in a few hours. Regardless, Ion's face twisted in fear when he saw the blood leaking out onto the floor. It was such a large quantity of blood lost. The bacillus activated by his previous anger and the wound. It meant --

"Esther, k-kill me!" Ion shouted hastily as he lifted his pale face. "What are you doing? I'm telling you to kill me quickly! Hurry!"

"Wh-what are you saying, Your Excellency?" asked Esther. *Is he deranged from the shock of the wound?* she asked herself. "Please calm down. I'll give you first aid right away."

"There's no time. Please, kill me! If you don't, I won't be myself. Ugh!" said Ion.

"Wh-what s the matter, Your Excellency?" asked Esther. She hugged the boy, whose body had begun to writhe. His body was trembling faintly, and sweat began to pour out all over his body.

Meanwhile, Dietrich's eyes danced happily as he gazed down at the boy twisting in agony and the girl beside him. "Ahhh, this is the first time you've witnessed it, Esther. That's the famous 'thirst,' the Methuselahs' blood anemia." The young man's voice sounded truly happy. While gloating like the devil gazing at a signed contract, he explained for the ignorant girl. "The Kudrak Bacillus in their blood feeds on red blood cells. They go crazy from desire for the hemoglobin in it. Look, he's already not himself."

At the sound of Dietrich's voice, Ion glanced up at Esther with weak eyes. His fangs, which had noticeably increased in sharpness, glinted as they protruded from the edges of his lips.

"It's no use. Run . . . Esther," said Ion. "The bacillus, I ... I ... GWAH!"

"Y-your Excellency!" said Esther as she tried to press down on Ion's shoulders, which had bent back into a contorted shape. He was probably in a state of shock due to blood loss. For now, she had to keep him from biting his tongue. Esther held the handkerchief in her hand to the boy's mouth, but her hand was gripped by something with inexplicable strength. It wasn't because of self-control that Esther didn't scream from the pain, which felt like her bones had broken.

Completely silent, Ion raised his head. His eyes, blood red, locked with Esther's.

"Y-your Excellency?" Esther asked hesitantly.

With a calm face, as though his previous torment was a bluff, Ion remained silent. Without responding to Esther's calls, he pushed up his body slowly.

"Your Excellency, my hand . . . Let go of my hand!" said Esther.

Instinctive warning signals were going off in Esther's head telling her something was terribly wrong. She tried to edge backward, but the Methuselah's uncanny strength didn't permit that. Without speaking, Ion drew the girl's body closer as she tried to escape. While drawing her in, he parted his lips and dripped a large quantity of saliva from his long fangs.

"Y-your Excellency ... It can't be -- "

"It's no use saying anything, Esther. He isn't the person you know any longer," said Puppeteer. Ion's blood-hungry eyes bored into Esther's neck. The face of the young man

watching from beyond the lattice remained composed, like a scientist's. "He now belongs to the bacillus. Acute anemia and the impulse to suck blood that follows are controlling him. I'm sorry, but he can no longer hear your voice."

The Kudrak Bacillus, microscopic parasites that live in the blood of all Methuselahs, change into a variety of forms and amplify their host's strength. If they slip into muscle cells and activate them, they then assist their host's shape-shifting. Or when wounded, they stop blood loss and close up wounds instead of platelets, and actually contribute to their host's existence in many ways.

But in return, they consume their host's red blood cells. The bacillus couldn't breathe oxygen on their own; by melting their terror, Dietrich didn't boast further, but quietly turned on his heel. "Well, I really wanted to watch until the end, but I'm leaving now. Unfortunately, I have one important job left. I have to finish it before Duke of Tigris or the other Imperial nobles notice. Therefore, I have no time to watch your demise."

It was nearly impossible to tell if his parting words as he opened the iron door to the underground dungeon were sincere.

Grinning like a mischievous cat, the young man said farewell one last time. "Good luck, Esther. I love you," said Puppeteer.

"Y-you vicious . . ." The girl shouted something at the end, but it got lost in the echo of the massive iron door slamming shut and never reached Puppeteer's ears.

II

The chemical luminescence of the light stick fastened to the gondola's prow cast a blue-white light on the water's surface, which flowed like India ink. Submerging her pole in the water, Astharoshe Asran voiced her regrets. "When you came tumbling in, I should have deliberated more," she said.

A line of huge columns, each standing nearly thirty feet in the air, and continuing into arches, cast dark shadows on the small boat moving along the canal. The arches, towering in the darkness, gave off a blue glow; there was nothing more eerie.

"You're a man who always exceeds my worst expectations," said Astharoshe. "I completely forgot about that. It was the blunder of my lifetime.

Sitting beside her was a silver-haired young man, taller than Aste, who laughed optimistically. The sound of the pole slicing through the water was unusually loud in the underground space. "Aste, what are you saying? Now I really don't know," said Abel, still giddy. "Don't blame yourself too much. It's fine to have a strong sense of responsibility, but won't that give you ulcers?"

"Who's blaming herself?" Astharoshe yelled. She grabbed the priest's chest and shook him. "I'm blaming *you*!"

"Ohhh, you were?" asked Abel. He looked at Aste with a stupefied face as she bared her fangs, but then he clapped his hands as if he were convinced. Grinning as if to make light of the situation, he said, "If that's true, I wish you'd said so clearly. Aste, you're always in a foul mood, so I've been worried the whole time."

My brain is going to melt, Aste thought. Fed up, she took her hands off the priest's chest. Deeply inhaling the odor that wafted around her while shaking her head in the same

rhythm, she grimaced. Their surroundings had stunk as if something were rotten for a while now.

"Argh! First off, why do I, the Marquise of Kiev, and Imperial Directly Reporting Chief Inspector, have to prowling around this kind of dark, smelly place? Even if we are sneaking in, there must be better places," said Astharoshe.

"Maybe there are, but all of them are full of guards. So even if we did get close, we wouldn't get in. On this occasion, luxury is the enemy," said Abel.

"Well, maybe so, but it's strangely irritating to be told that by you," said Astharoshe. Suppressing the urge to knock down her companion, who lectured her with a triumphant face, Aste moved the pole along the canal.

Because the Empress had been assassinated, the interior of the Celestial Imperial Palace was being strictly guarded. After the nobles who visited the palace during the emergency entered, the Hall of the Great Dome had been completely sealed, its periphery locked down so that even water couldn't leak out, and nobody could get in.

However, unlike Aste, who had half given up on invading the Celestial Imperial Palace, the priest had pointed out a different route. In some old document relating to the Imperial capital that he'd seen in the Outer, there 'd been a description of an ancient underground aqueduct.

Even Aste hadn't known about the existence of this "underground palace." The priest had prattled on about "ancient Byzantine Empire" and "Constantine I" and other nonsensical words, but who really cared about that? As for Aste, who had exhausted all ideas, it seemed like betting on a drowning man grasping at straws. In the end, though, a straw was a straw.

"Father, does this canal really connect to the Celestial Imperial Palace?" asked Astharoshe suspiciously. They'd been rowing for close to an hour, but no matter how far they went, the dark water's surface just continued, with nothing resembling an exit in sight. "It wouldn't be funny if we came this far and got lost," said Astharoshe.

"Hmmm, it's probably fine, although there's no way to be sure," said Abel.

"You truly are reliable," Astharoshe replied sarcastically. Still wearing an icy expression, the Marquise of Kiev put her hand in her pocket. She took out a small bottle filled with red liquid. If Abel's information was correct, they should be at the Celestial Imperial Palace soon. Because of the bacillus that had sensed its host's stress and begun to activate, she'd been feeling a slight "thirst" in her throat for a while. Before she completely opened the bottle's lid, Aste's hand suddenly stopped. Her amber eyes penetrated the darkness, and the hairs on the back of her neck were standing on end. She knew somebody was watching them.

"What's wrong, Aste? You're getting silent all of a sudden. Do you have to go to the bathroom?" asked Abel.

"Shut up, idiot," said Astharoshe. Discreetly casting her eyes left and right, Aste threw the bottle at the obnoxious priest. Taking a direct hit to the face, Abel bent backward, his nose spouting blood, but he still managed to drop his empty hand to his hip. There were no enemy-like shapes in his field of vision, but he got the sense that a battle was about to begin.

"It seems your street information was correct, Father," said Astharoshe.

"I told you so. So, why is it correct?" asked Abel.

"That's ..." said Astharoshe.

The splendid row of pillars released their shadows onto the water's surface. The Marquise of Kiev slowly drew the spear at her hip.

"... because we've been ambushed!" she continued.

It seemed as though the darkness had exploded. Aste pointed the spear at the water's surface and suddenly pulled its switch. The water's surface instantly evaporated at the touch of the few-thousand-degree plasma and gave off a ghastly white smoke. Abel's eyes nearly popped out, but it wasn't because of the beautiful woman's seemingly deranged behavior. Inside the white fog were large shadows sinking to the water's bottom, skewered by the plasma spear.

Abel's voice grew shrill after seeing the huge shadows in military overcoats. "What are —"

"Look out, Father! We're surrounded!" said Astharoshe.

One after the other, menacing shadows floated up around the gondola, concealed by the opaque mist. They numbered about twenty, and there wasn't a bit of disarray in the ring that surrounded them.

"Uh-oh, there are too many!" said Abel.

The priest drew his percussion revolver with a click of his tongue, and the battle began. The enemy crept along the walls and pillars like monkeys, attacking the gondola, which shook like a tree leaf, at close range. Abel and Aste, back to back on the narrow boat, fought off their attackers with bullets and the spear, but there was only so much they could handle.

"Man, these guys are fast!" said Astharoshe.

Aste was taken aback by the number of enemy figures approaching, slipping past the plasma whip. Because they were originally Methuselah corpses, their movements were very fast. Fascinated by their movements and the way they seemed to be unified by a single force, it was very difficult for Aste to aim.

The gap of safety began to close as bullets and the spear gouged the air aimlessly.

"Father, we have to get out of here!" Astharoshe bellowed while barely managing to deflect the flash of a battleaxe with the hilt of her spear. "We have no chance of beating this many. Let's get out!"

But Aste's plea was rejected by a stern voice. The priest, glaring into the canal, shook his head resolutely. "I can't do that! I can't abandon them, Aste! I'll break through here. While they're following me, you escape outside, I'm really sorry I got you involved."

"Idiot!" Astharoshe said angrily. Her white hair flexing like a whip, Aste took one big step in. A flash of the spear she brandished in the opposite hand drew an arc in the air, and a gas-mask-covered head flung across the sky trailing a band of red. "I am honored to be relied upon by a friend! I never once thought that you got me involved. I will fortify this place. While I'm fending them off, you go to the Celestial Imperial Palace!"

Abel looked surprised. "But —"

"No buts! If we waste more time, the brat and Esther will be in danger. Move it!" said Astharoshe. She didn't think she could beat this many opponents, but she had no intention of dying alone without resisting. *If I can take even one of them with me, I'll buy a second more time.* "Marquise of Kiev, Astharoshe Asran is coming!"

She abnormally stimulated her nerve cells with a low roar, and launched herself off the edge of the boat. With the range of her spear set to maximum, her figure appeared as though it were evolving into a hurricane.

"Aste!" cried Abel. But his scream reached Aste's ears the instant she went into haste mode. Aste barely recognized the black shadow charging toward her in the corner of her range of vision. The blade of the battleaxe he brandished drew a smooth arc over the top of her head. All of a sudden, a severed head, with the sharply cut edge revealed, bounced up and then plunged into the water, creating a loud splash.

"Aste!" Abel shouted, horrified.

Leaning on the crying priest's outstretched arms, Aste blinked. *Why am I still alive? How in the world . . .*

"Aste, look!" said Abel.

The red shadows where he was pointing answered Aste's question.

"Lord Baybars?" Astharoshe said, drawing in a large breath.

Baybars, Baron of Khartoum, was the giant wrapped in scarlet armor who glared at the battlefield from next to a pillar. Bright red blood was dripping from the tip of the seven-pronged sword he carried. Had he saved her just now? Or was it the red, soldiers lined up behind him?

"Ienichieri? Why are they in a place like this?" asked Astharoshe.

"I see Lady Astharoshe Asran, Directly Reporting Chief Inspector, there," said the Chief of the Palace Guards in a low voice. "The great meeting has already begun. You had better go quickly to the Hall of the Great Dome."

"B-but ... why?" asked Astharoshe. Aste's suspicion was only natural. According to Count of Memphis, wasn't Baybars on the enemy's side? "Why are you helping us, Baron?" asked Astharoshe.

Baybars remained silent, checking the enemy shadows. Aste tried to repeat her question, but somebody was pulling on her sleeve from behind.

"Let's hurry, Aste. They aren't our enemies. You're Baybars, right?" Abel hastily asked the Methuselah in red as he grasped onto the woman's hand. "Where is my companion? The Terran girl?"

"In the underground dungeon," Baybars answered at once. "Once you get above ground, descend from the 'Dead Man's Gate.' It's right there."

"Thanks for your kindness," said Abel.

Not showing any particular reaction to the oddly polite response, Aste bowed her head.

"That's that... Well, let's hurry, Aste. There isn't much time," said Abel.

"Y-yeah," said Astharoshe.

Abel jumped out of the boat, dragging along Aste, as he ran off into the canal. Meanwhile, the masked soldiers who remained turned back as a group toward the invaders. The enemies began to take steps backward as though they were terrified. Pointing at them with "He Who Breaks Spinal Cords", The Chief of the Palace Guards gave a short order: "Annihilate them!"

III

Citizens were not allowed to enter the Hall of the Great Dome for the entire day. After the Methuselahs were admitted into the Celestial Imperial Palace, its entrance was tightly sealed, and connections with the outside world were severed.

The sight of the nobles seated in a fan shape around the throne appeared no different than in the Diwan the other day— except for only one thing. The pivot of the fan, cast downward toward those assembled, and the vacant beryl throne.

The meeting began with Marquise of Damascus, Feron Lin, speaking first. As the yellow-skinned, black-haired Privy Counselor stood up gracefully, she scanned the faces of the lords with narrowed eyes. "Assembled lords," she began, "I am very grateful that you responded to the invitation despite your fatigue. I thank you on behalf of the State Secrets Institution."

"I'm sorry, but we'd like you to omit the unnecessary greetings, Marquise," said a voice from outside the nine-fold circle. In a chiding tone, the voice continued. "We're assembled here in order to find out the facts. First, I'd like an explanation of what happened on the Island of Beloved Children."

"That is under investigation at present," answered Nazim, Count of Gaza, the giant seated next to the Marquise of Damascus. A Privy Counselor never would have accepted this kind of rude utterance — until yesterday. "From now on, we will establish a committee to investigate the facts. I'd like you to leave the method of selecting its members to the State Secrets Institution. After the members are decided on, they will ascertain how to investigate, and after that — "

"That's rather circuitous, isn't it?" asked Sulayman. The low voice's remark was curt, but it echoed throughout the Hall of the Great Dome like thunder.

Shocked, Lin, Nazim, and the other Privy Counselors' eyes peered at the person sitting next to them.

"Lord Sulayman, what did you just say?" asked Lin.

"It's circuitous, that's what I said," the Second Privy Counselor, Duke of Tigris, answered casually, his arms still crossed. His eyes closed in his deeply chiseled face.

They were probably confused, because the plan that the Privy Counselors thought they had earnestly discussed and decided on the night before was being overturned. The youngest of the six Privy Counselors, Reyard, Duke of Macedonia, rapped hard on the desk. "You've called our decision circuitous, but what other plan is there? Isn't it our job to investigate what happened last night, and report back to the lords?"

"What we must first do is choose our new leader, Duke of Macedonia," said Sulayman in a gentle tone. But the meaning of what he said was weighty. "Our leader, Her Majesty the Empress, is gone. Last night, she was killed by Outer agents. Yes, *killed*. First of all, we have to acknowledge that fact."

The Second Privy Counselor's comment was followed by unanimous silence.

"There is nothing else to do but choose a new leader, and have that person inherit the will of Her Majesty the late Empress. Am I wrong?" asked Sulayman.

Her Majesty the *late* Empress? At the sound of those words, multiple voices jumbled throughout the meeting hall. Everyone believed that the Empress was the eternal, indestructible ruler of the Empire. Until last night. Now that the illusion had been shattered, the unfamiliar words "late Empress" weighed heavily on the attendees' shoulders. The Empress was dead. The one they'd considered indestructible and immortal had been moved to the world of memory and reminiscence. Those who survived must continue living in this world, and they needed a new leader.

"That's true. We must choose a new Empress!" said a voice.

Young lords, seated far in the back, raised their impassioned voices. In the hall, where confusion and chaos had taken over, no matter how small in number, the group that spoke in unison could take reign easily. The whispers grew louder, and began to fill the meeting hall.

Carefully considering his timing, Sulayman muttered in his heart: *Soon . . .* Among his supporters, only Radu was entirely informed about the plan. The other members didn't know what Sulayman and Radu had done last night. If they had, even those who were dissatisfied with the Empress's outlook toward the Outer might have been seized with fear. The spell of the Empress had been that strong. But now that spell was gone.

With an expression that almost appeared maudlin, Sulayman made his final move. "I think it's clear what we must do now, but..."

But it was absolutely forbidden to go too far. The final choice required everybody's consensus. The Duchess of Moldova, who would have been Sulayman's most powerful rival if she were there, was no longer in this world. Each of the Privy Counselors besides her was also powerful, but as long as it was one against one, he had nothing to fear. In the end, there was nothing to worry about. As soon as he stood up slowly, Sulayman extended his sturdy arms toward the assembly hall. "Lords, I ask you, who should we welcome as our next ruler?"

Sulayman's fervent speech, which might have made history, was rudely interrupted. "Wait, Duke of Tigris!" said Astharoshe, her voice filled with ambition and courage.

The doors to the meeting hall were violently thrown open. Standing beyond the rectangle of light was the outline of a slender, tall woman. "I am here to inform the assembled lords! I am Directly Reporting Chief Inspector Astharoshe Asran!" Peering down the length of the meeting hall with ferocious eyes, the white-haired beauty spoke as if declaring war. "Today, I have come to accuse Duke of Tigris of treason!"

"Ah ... Ka ..." Ion struggled to breathe, choking on the ever-present stench of blood. His handsome face contorted with each breath, and it looked as though his eyes, his reason, and his desire were battling it out with the true personality of Ion Fortuna. "Kill me, Esther."

The groan sounded closer to a plea than a wish. Biting his own lips with his fangs as they descended toward Esther's neck, Ion dropped his bloodshot eyes to the dagger on the floor.

"I don't want to suck your blood. Esther, please . . . before I kill you . . . Please kill me!"

"Your E-excellency..." said Esther.

Vampire. Esther didn't know how to respond to the pleas of that race. *What answer should I give the boy who refuses to steal blood, and begs me to end his life?* she wondered. *There's no answer I can possibly give!*

"Esther . . . h-hurry" said Ion.

As Esther hesitated, the tremors that had taken over Ion's entire body were getting more and more severe. Second by second, he knew he was losing his sanity. He glanced at the silver sparkle radiating on the floor. Hot breath leaked from his mouth. The light of reason was already vanishing from his copper eyes, and an unquenchable thirst began to take hold of him.

Even if Esther gave Ion blood, it was obvious it wouldn't end with merely blood loss. In order to satisfy his thirst, Ion would have to drain Esther's life completely. There was only one way to avoid that — to pierce his heart with the dagger beside her. It wouldn't only save Esther's life, but Ion's soul, as well.

Esther softly patted Ion's hair with an affectionate smile. "It's fine, Your Excellency." As she gently stroked his smooth hair there was no sign of fear in Esther's face. She defenselessly exposed her pale throat, sweating a little from stress. Ignoring the dagger on the floor, Esther whispered in the vampire's ear. "It's fine if you do, Your Excellency. In exchange — I'm begging you — please don't cry anymore. It isn't your fault."

"Ahhh . . ." Ion moaned.

A faint light shone in Ion's eyes. Was God taking pity on their wretched lives? Or was it a trick of the devil? Either way, it was miraculous that a Methuselah could, even slightly, regain his sanity after suffering an outbreak of thirst.

"Esther . . . I . . ." Tears of blood flowed down Ion's cheeks as he called her name. Retaining just a sliver of sanity had never been so cruel. The boy gazed, his eyes full of despair, at where his talons had bitten into Esther's shoulder as his lips trembled with the sweet joy of touching her white throat. All of a sudden, a gush of blood shot upward followed by a strangled cry.

"Your Excellency?" said Esther, opening her eyes at the sound of the scream. Crimson blood drenched her face. But it wasn't Esther's blood. The silver dagger had been thrust into Ion's thigh. "Count of Memphis! Wh-what have you — "

"Thank you, Esther," said Ion.

His sanity, provoked by the severe pain, had driven away the bacillus's desire. Ion smiled peacefully as he gouged his own thigh. He withdrew the deadly weapon, trailing blood, and aimed for his heart.

"It's a pity I don't have a soul. If I had, I could be by your side forever. I'm eternally thankful I met you," said Ion. A burst of strength that turned his joints white overcame the boy's hand. Taking the hilt firmly, Ion pointed the tip of the blade directly at his heart. "Farewell!"

"Nooo, st-stop!" Esther cried.

Ion appeared strangely content. But the next moment, the dangerous weapon cut deeply into the boy's chest with a brutal-sounding noise.

"Eh?" said Ion and Esther simultaneously.

The smile disappeared from Ion's face, as did the scream from Esther's throat. They stared at each other, perplexed. The dagger Ion had grabbed lay deep within his chest, but not one drop of blood oozed from the wound.

Suddenly, a relaxed voice echoed from beyond the lattice door. "Phew, it seems I made it in time." A tall figure holding a smoking percussion revolver in his right hand and a glass bottle with some red liquid in it in his left hand was standing outside the cell. His face beneath the silver hair was smiling kindly, like an angel who'd found lost children. "Hey, you two, are you all right? Sorry I'm late. I got a little sidetracked along the way," said Abel.

"Ahhh!" Staring at the man who'd just provided an unsolicited excuse, Esther couldn't stop herself from shouting joyfully. "Father Nightroad!"

IV

"The traitor's accomplice... What honor is there in coming here?" asked Vashmar, Marquis of Navarino, sharply rebuking the white-haired beauty. He was the oldest among the Privy Counselors, after the late Duchess of Moldova and Sulayman, but although he was old, his ardent spirit was incomparable. The young lords, who'd been observing the situation, reflexively ducked their heads at the loud voice.

"Marquise of Kiev! Although you are a courtier, you'd better be prepared to die for the crimes of conspiring with Outer Terrans and killing Her Majesty!" Vashmar bellowed.

"I will gladly accept the blame for arriving late at this important gathering. But, Marquis of Navarino, concerning the matter of treason, I have an objection," said Astharoshe.

Looking over at the Marquis of Navarino, who was still trying to scold his opponent, the Marquise of Damascus interjected. "Now that you mention it, you said something strange," said Lin. Her hair waving like black silk, Feron Lin blinked her oval eyes. "You mentioned that you came to accuse Duke of Tigris of treason. What do you mean by that?"

"I mean exactly what I said. In my official duty as Directly Reporting Chief Inspector, I accuse Sulayman, Duke of Tigris, here and now. The charge is treason," Astharoshe replied astutely.

A sound that howled like the winter wind resounded throughout the hall. The lords watching on all held their breath. Everyone who'd just agreed with Sulayman regarded one another with suspicious glances. Was the scene that was unfolding before their eyes merely a part of the play crafted by Duke of Tigris, or was it a dream?

Inwardly cursing the naiveté of the guards who'd let in the intruder, Sulayman slowly glanced up. "Then I will ask, Marquise of Kiev," he said, "What is the proof with which I'm accused? If it isn't a false accusation, can I get you to show me the proof?"

"There are witnesses," Astharoshe said assuredly. "I request the imprisoned Count of Memphis and his Terran companion be summoned. Please hear the circumstances from their mouths, and compare their testimony. When they come, you will see that my accusation is true."

There was no sweetness left in Aste's voice. The amber eyes peering down at the Second Privy Counselor resembled icy blades. However, Sulayman's gaze was still colder as he argued the woman's point. "I'm sorry, Marquise of Kiev, but that's impossible." The so-called greatest noble in the Empire shook his head sadly. "The two people you speak of are already dead. Just now, there was a report that their lifeless bodies were found in the cell."

Aste's face blanched, but a raspy voice burst from her lips. "Sulayman, you silenced them. You killed them!"

"It isn't proper to call it silencing," said Sulayman. He smiled mockingly, but inwardly, his boiling anger was threatening to explode. He imagined strangling Aste with his own hands, but he wasn't Emperor yet. In this kind of situation, it wouldn't be a good idea to invite the lords' suspicions for such a small thing. Swapping his cold, bitter smile for a tolerant, affectionate one, the man said, "They killed each other in the cell. I don't know why, but that's what I heard. Shall we have an autopsy performed on the bodies?"

"Interesting. If you say you want an autopsy, let's do it immediately." It wasn't Aste who interrupted Sulayman's speech. Everyone turned toward the weak, but confident, voice. Two new figures appeared beside the door. "As you can see, I'm unharmed, Sulayman!" said Ion, held up by the redhead girl. "I know all about your plot. It's already obvious that you killed my grandmother and murdered Her Majesty. If you're really an Imperial noble, you should surrender bravely and accept arrest!"

Ion Fortuna, Count of Memphis, bared his fangs mercilessly. His face was dirtied with blood, but his courage, like that of a young lion, awed the inhabitants of the meeting hall.

A soft gasp escaped Sulayman's mouth as he was struck by Ion's gaze. "Count of Memphis! Why is he alive? Radu, you incompetent . . ." It was a completely unexpected situation. Ignoring the blood dripping from his bitten lip, he roared angrily, "You're the one who'll give up, Count of Memphis, you disgusting traitor! What are you doing, lords? Arrest this traitor at once!"

Responding to Sulayman's call, a few of the young lords stood up. They each reached for the hilt of their sword belt, and prepared to enter haste mode.

Meanwhile, Aste stood at attention, waiting to block their attack. "Withdraw, Count of Memphis!" she shouted. Not showing any sign of fear about the difference in manpower, she hefted her spear to shield the boy and girl. Nobles bearing weapons also stood up, trying to stop the potential bloodbath. The situation grew critical as hostility threatened to boil over.

<Stop, Sulayman. >

A droning voice momentarily silenced the rage inside the hall.

<You should stop this mockery. I can't stand to witness what you've become any longer. >

It was a voice that everybody in attendance had heard before, and it was the most natural voice to hear here. Despite that, all onlookers were frozen in shock. Staring, dumbfounded, at the gossamer green curtain that slowly began to flit above the stairs, the packed hall remained perfectly quiet.

Finally, among the quietude, somebody's fiercely shaking voice arose from nowhere. "Her Majesty the Empress!"

V

Sulayman was beside himself. "Your Majesty? Why are you — "

<Why am I safe? You say that like it's unfortunate that I'm unharmed, Duke of Tigris. >

Beyond the veil, the Empress seemed to be smiling ironically, and there were traces of sarcasm in the mechanical voice.

<Certainly, when you tried to kill me on the Island of Beloved Children, I wavered a little, but as you see, I am unharmed. >

"Tried to kill you?" said Sulayman, shaking his pale face. A moment later, his tough psychological strength overpowered his weakness, and his voice in reply sounded calm and unafraid, "Your Majesty, are you also going to accept what these fools say is true? How can you believe that I would murder Your Majesty with a bomb?"

<Murder with a bomb?>

The girl in the veil tilted her head slightly, but there was an affected ring in her voice.

<I'm not talking about when you blew up the Duchess of Moldova's mausoleum, because I didn't happen to be there just then. You should come.>

One more figure appeared at the top of the stairs as the Empress spoke, causing a new stir among the meeting hall. Another Empress appeared, covered with the veil and wearing the Empress's green clothing; a girl who so closely resembled the real Empress in height and build that they could be twins.

<She is my shadow. I've asked her to represent me at times when I've been away from the Celestial Imperial Palace. You may take off the veil, and show them your face>

Nodding silently at the Empress, the other Empress carefully removed her hat and veil, and lifted off the black wig. A lovely woman's face peeked out from under her damp, shining, long blonde hair. But the uproar that ensued among the attending lords wasn't in praise of her beauty.

"Wh-what? That's . . . Duchess of Moldova!" As the lords released a moan of shock and wonder in unison, their eyes opened wide as if they'd seen a dead person come alive. Ion, who'd been the leading participant until then, fell silent, his jaw dropping toward the ground.

Pointing absentmindedly, Ion's strangled voice had hardly any capacity for speech.

"Grandmother? Wh-why? How, Grandmother?"

The person watching from atop the stairs flashed a mischievous smile. "It's been a while, Ion. Ohhh, you've gotten somewhat thinner?" Mirka remarked.

The girl, who appeared to be in her mid-teens based on her outward appearance, was Mirka Fortuna, Chief Privy Counselor, and Duchess of Moldova, the greatest noble in the Empire. She smiled sweetly at the grandson she'd been reunited with after four months, bending her knees in a playful gesture.

"Why are you making such a face when you're getting to see your granny after so long? Are you unhappy I'm alive?" asked Mirka.

"Huh? N-no, never!" Ion exclaimed. The boy's face finally returned to its normal color, as if he'd regained his sanity. Shaking his head at the teasing question, Ion dragged his disabled leg a step backward. "J-just . . . how are you unharmed, Grandmother? I'm sure I saw your body in the mansion."

Gesturing for the Chief Privy Counselor to withdraw with a wave of her hand, the Empress opened her mouth again. <I knew the traitors would act when Count of Memphis returned home.>

Her veil was turned toward the Second Privy Counselor, who stood there silently, possessing a certain air of inviolability. <Because I appointed the Duchess of Moldova to be my Kagemusha in the Inner Court, and placed only an automaton in the mansion. Count of Memphis is also aware of what happened after that. It caused the Count trouble, but it was my intention to smoke out the malcontents nesting in the Imperial capital. Forgive me. Well, Duke of Tigris.>

The Empress's tone suddenly changed. It was usually near impossible to guess her emotions because of her masked voice; however, something electric could now be detected in it.

<I never thought you would take charge of a plot like this. Of all my many children, I expected great things of you. >

"You say so, Your Majesty, but ..." said Sulayman trailing off. He was trying to answer the Empress's accusation calmly, but he couldn't keep his voice from going hoarse. "... I still don't have an answer to my previous question. How can you so easily accept the accusations of Count of Memphis and the others that I tried to murder Your Majesty with a bomb? Although the Duchess of Moldova's murder had nothing to do with Count of Memphis, is there some relationship between that and my rebellion?"

<I never once said that you tried to kill me with a bomb.> Slender fingers lifted the veil. The Empress's voice was laden with sarcasm, but it also contained a deep sadness. "But you certainly tried to kill me on the Island of Beloved Children, Sulayman. Don't you recognize this face?"

When the veil was fully lifted, the sight of Empress Vladika silenced every last Methuselah and Terran in the meeting hall.

Underneath a curtain of unkempt black hair was a girl's face, not very old, with shining jade green eyes and a slightly pointed chin. She was rather too young to be called the mother of all Methuselachs, but somehow, her white face appeared oddly dignified.

The assembled nobles said nothing to their mother, whom they were seeing for the first time. Some other people were taken aback for entirely different reasons.

"S-S-Seth?" Esther exclaimed.

"Crazy! Why is that girl — " Ion could barely contain himself.

Esther and Ion, who'd been watching the situation without saying a word, were clearly startled. That was a person they knew well — the peculiar girl they'd met in the Terran district, and seen again on the Island of Beloved Children. But how did she get in the hall?

There was one more person who shared their shock. "Y-you're from that time . . ." The voice of Sulayman, Duke of Tigris, shook violently enough to make one question his supposed greatness.

"When you turned the Ring of Solomon on me, I did indeed falter, Sulayman," said Seth, or rather, Vladika. She jutted her chin toward the mastermind. "But now your plot has been revealed. Is there anything you want to say? If so, I'll listen."

"There is," said Sulayman. There still wasn't much color in his face, but the vigor was rapidly returning to his voice. Bowing his head, he said, "Earlier, Your Majesty said you had expected great things of me."

"I did. And I'm sorry that it's come to this," said Seth.

"Sorry?" asked Sulayman. He showed no sign of fear. Instead, his lips twisted up as if rejoicing that his real intentions had finally been understood. "Sorry? HAH! You tell such transparent lies, our Great Mother. You don't expect anything of anyone. There is not one noble whom you trust!"

If she had trusted anyone, who would ever turn traitor? Who would have turned a sword on their beloved mother?

As Sulayman lifted his right hand, the majority of those assembled reacted immediately. Some gripped their swords, others kicked over their chairs to restrain the man, and a few others even entered haste mode. But the second the Ring of Solomon glimmering on the traitor's middle finger shot out a burst of compressed air, only Aste, who was already holding her spear, attacked.

"Sulayman!" Astharoshe roared. *Kwah!* The invisible flash released from her spear as she swung it down battered the great man's hand, resulting in a shriek mixed with the sound of boiling plasma. Blood sprayed from Sulayman's lips as his tall body made the shape of a bow and fell, facing prone toward the throne. His heart, evaporated by the plasma spear, was already beginning to spasm slightly. No Methuselah could survive such a blow, but there was no sign of pain on the traitor's face. There was even a seemingly satisfied smile in his eyes as they stared into space.

The shot from the Ring of Solomon had carved deep claw marks in the throne at the top of the stairs. The stone chair had been smashed until nearly none of its shape remained.

"Your Majesty?"

"Don't worry. It's nothing," said Seth. There wasn't one scratch on the Empress's face as she answered the courtier who enquired after her. As she glided down the stairs, her onlookers gasped. Descending to the floor, she knelt beside the blood-smeared traitor. "Why didn't you kill me, Sulayman?" Seth lifted the traitor, who was barely breathing, with the gentleness of a mother holding a baby. "You missed deliberately. Why?"

On the brink of death, the Methuselah seemed to faintly smile bitterly. "Is there a child who doesn't love his parent, our Great Mother?" asked Sulayman. His life's blood was draining from his body, yet he desperately continued to speak as if afraid he would leave something unsaid. "I hate you. Having served you for three hundred years, I still couldn't understand you at all. Where did you come from, and where will you go? And where are you leading us? You never tell us anything."

Sulayman's body arched back. His words came out so faintly that he sounded more dead than alive. "Your Majesty . . . Please tell me. . ."

"Ask me anything," said Seth.

The man seemed to crack a weak smile at the kind voice in his ear that sounded like a lullaby. "Who are you? No, we . . ." His lips, still open, stopped moving, and didn't say another word. His eyelids slowly closed, and his face froze in eternal silence.

Gently stroking Sulayman's blood-smeared hair, the Empress offered a sorrowful answer. "It would be easy for me to answer that, but . . ." Her eyes remained downcast for a while, just as though she were mourning the death of a beloved child. She gently laid his dead body on the floor. "Lords, thank you for your hard work."

Seth stood up, smiling mischievously, without wiping off the blood that dirtied her clothes. Her jade green eyes scanned the attendees until stopping on two figures standing in the

background. "Count of Memphis and Marquise of Kiev, I commend your actions. You both worked harder than I could've imagined. The Empire will richly reward your loyalty and distinguished services. You can count on it."

Despite the Empress's grateful tone, Ion froze, his face cramped. Esther opened her mouth timidly instead. "Seth, um . . . Ah, no, Your Majesty, um . . ."

"You can call me Seth, Esther," the girl answered in Roman common language as she cleverly wrinkled her petite nose. "Because Augusta Vladika is my name as Empress, and you aren't my subject. You're my friend. And my friends call me Seth."

Her playfully smiling face and voice certainly belonged to *that* girl. Esther tried to calm her confused mind. "Well then, Seth, are you really, *really* the Empress of the Empire, Augusta Vladika?"

"Basically, yes. It's one of my many titles. But please keep the tea-selling incident a secret. It'll set a bad example if I break my own rules, right?" Seth winked cheerfully at Esther, who was finding it hard to speak. All of a sudden, Seth's expression changed as if she'd remembered something important. "By the way, Esther, can I ask you one thing? There should be another envoy who came with you, right? Where is he? Don't you know where he went after he rescued you from the jail?"

"You mean, Father Nightroad?" asked Esther. Now that Seth had mentioned it, Esther realized she'd completely forgotten about him. Clueless as to how Seth knew about him, Esther clapped her hands lightly. "He had a change of heart after we mentioned the Baron of Luxor, and he went somewhere else. He told us to come here by ourselves."

"Baron of Luxor . . . Radu?" asked Seth.

"Well, *that* Baron of Luxor isn't *the* Baron of Luxor," said Esther. *That's a stupid explanation, even for me*, Esther thought to herself. It was very doubtful that she could get Seth to understand, but she still tried to explain to the best of her knowledge. "It's a long story, but there's this man named Lohengrin in an organization the Vatican has been hunting, and this man is controlling the Baron's body. Anyway, that's the Baron, but it's not *the* Baron."

"Lohengrin. The man from the Orden?" asked Seth.

"Y-yes, that's right. Um, do you know him, Your Majesty?" asked Esther.

The smile had disappeared from Seth's face for the first time. A second later, she hurried off, her sleeves flapping.

"Your Majesty! What in the world?" said Mirka.

"I have to leave for a little while! Mirka, you stay here, and take care of the cleanup!" said Seth. Turning back to her subjects, the girl asked in a voice swelling with emotion, "Marquise of Kiev, is your spear still usable? If it is, come with me. And Esther, you too. The rest of you, don't leave here."

"Your Majesty, m-me too!" pleaded Ion.

Seth shook her head, gazing down at Ion as he lurched forward, dragging his blood-soaked leg. "Not you, Count of Memphis. You can't move on that leg, can you? Stay here quietly."

"So, Your Majesty, where are we going?" asked Astharoshe.

"To find Radu — or rather, the one who's controlling Radu's body," said Seth. "Find him, and if necessary, crush him. If the Orden man and his *fingers* have gotten into here, all I can do is go there!"

Three Ienichieri corpses lay on the floor, and on the other side, eight Jaeger corpses.

Well, that's not a bad number as a battle outcome. "The Boundary Room? Indeed, it's the perfect name," said Puppeteer.

The Empress's grand living room was as quiet as if the earlier catastrophe that took place there had been a dream. Even the birds that should've been flying free among the wide artificial space weren't making a peep.

His hand still on the huge door that towered before him, the blue-haired young man chuckled thinly. "Yes, it's a very tasteful antique, but what about inside?"

Peering at the bracelet on his wrist and the numbers on its liquid crystal display, Radu-Dietrich spoke to himself. While he watched the numbers that changed moment by moment, he softly slid his hand on the surface of the door, which had no knob. It didn't take long before a wicked smile spread across his lips.

When he finally detected a noise that sounded no louder than an insect, the door that hadn't budged until then opened silently toward the room's interior. Only darkness lay beyond. But the young man didn't hesitate. Stepping into the pitch black without any sign of fear, his face tightened. "It's dark," he said, shrugging. He inhaled deeply, as if to inhale the gloom. "Let there be light!"

Dazzling light suddenly filled the huge space. Including the high ceiling, all of the walls were covered in delicate gauges and consoles, and the walls themselves, woven with luminescent fiber, shone brightly. A few thousand monitors flickered with figures, letters and numbers; they radiated a gleam of newness as though nobody's hands had ever touched the keyboards in front of them.

Standing in front of a conspicuously large chair, Dietrich snapped his fingers lightly. "Well, I've managed to get this far, although it took considerable effort." He couldn't, for the life of him, figure out what such a place was for.

The complex output displayed on the gauges kept changing by the second, and most of the keys near the monitors had completely unknown functions. But the handsome young man sat down quite cheerfully in the throne-like chair, nimbly strumming the complex arrangement of keys as if tuning a piano. He was like a curious child finally being given a coveted toy.

His slender fingers tapped a tender rhythm on the keyboard, as if playing a nocturne, but it wasn't long before he stopped. "Self-repair function. Is this..." Puppeteer's red lips grinned at the numbers displayed on the gauge. "As I thought, *that's* still alive. It looks dead, but it's not dead."

The young man took a transparent cube out of his pocket and inserted it into a slot that opened in the console. Following the directions that came up on one of the displays, he followed the data duplication procedure. The procedure was rather complex, but it only took a few seconds until a duplicate of the enormous data was transferred. Removing the ejected cube, the young man sighed in satisfaction for the first time. He'd finally accomplished the duty the Orden had given him.

In order to complete so much work, he'd cooperated with the hard-liners in the few months since Carthage, and had done odd jobs as Sulayman's pet dog. After that, he'd been involved in the Duchess of Milan's assassination plot and the hard-liners' coup d'etat, but this had been his ultimate intention. Joyous about being released at last from his burdensome work, the young man stood up from the keyboard. Actually, he started to stand up, but suddenly stopped moving. As though he'd thought of something, his narrowed eyes began to sparkle with a mischievous light. "I managed to make it this far. I think I'll play a little." Rubbing his gloved hands together, the young man reseated himself in the chair.

The Puppeteer suspected it was likely that Sulayman and his rivals would be bickering over the throne in the meeting hall. Now that the Empress and the Duchess of Moldova were dead, before long, the Empire would succumb to chaos. When it did, the Vatican, those buffoons who pretended to be the guardians of humanity, would surely butt in. And after that . . .

Biting back a smile at the future plans that made his heart dance, Dietrich put his hands on the keyboard again. His gaze still fixed on the screens that blinked in grand complexity, he moved his fingers up and down at a faster tempo than before. He'd already gotten the copy; there was no need for the original. He didn't think Sulayman or the Privy Counselors could make use of the data, but there was no need to leave any unnecessary traces.

His fingers suddenly stopped moving the instant he ran the virus program. The young man stretched his back like a pianist who was stuck for a tune, and gazed at the keyboard silently for a moment. "You came after all."

Before he could turn his handsome face around, Jaegers, the living dead, with battleaxes in their hands, had surrounded him. But Dietrich wasn't only addressing his loyal subordinates. There was a figure in a citizen's uniform standing silently beyond them.

Beneath beautiful silver hair that looked like a crown, blue eyes glittered. The gun in the figure's hand was pointed at the young man. The person must have broken through the trap in the underground palace.

"I'm glad you arrived safely, Father. So, I take it Esther and the others are all right?" asked Puppeteer. There was no sign of fear in Dietrich's face, even with the gun turned on him. Instead, he spoke with the ease of greeting an old friend. "It's been a long time, Father Abel Nightroad. I mean, Crusnik 02."

VI

"Get away from there, Dietrich," said Abel. His voice was quiet, but spirited. "That's not for you two to touch. Please get away from there."

"You two?" asked Puppeteer, scoffing disdainfully at his opponent. "You're talking as though *we're* special, aren't you, Father? Do you care that much about this guy?"

A sharp voice burst from the priest's throat. "Never mind, just get away!" said Abel. His normally easygoing face was severely strained, as if he were a different person. "You mustn't touch that. It will only cause disaster."

"Disaster? But you all used this before, right?" asked Puppeteer without changing his mocking tone. He ran his fingers over the keyboard in a deliberate show of disrespect. "I know, you see, what you – more accurately, what you *all* – did when you used this before. Oh, I'm not blaming you in particular. I can see that the seal put on this still isn't undone. If you'll overlook it, I'll say goodbye for today."

"I can't do that," said Abel. The noise of the gun's hammer raising echoed in the priest's hands. "The restart file in your pocket. Leave that and go!"

"You're unexpectedly sharp-eyed," said Puppeteer. Like a child who'd been double-dared, Dietrich stuck out his tongue.

To prove he had absolutely no feelings of guilt, he shrugged and shamelessly declared: "Father, when I'm told 'don't touch,' on the contrary, I want to touch. And I'll add one more thing. I hate being ordered by other people so much that I'd rather die."

As Abel began to seethe, the Jaegers kicked the ground and deployed in a semicircle. Four battleaxes, deployed in haste mode, rushed toward the priest from four directions like a wall of knives. The priest had nowhere to go.

"Nanomachine Crusnik 02 40% limited activity – Authorized." When that ominous voice rumbled, the wall of knives shattered with a gust of black wind. A strangely shaped scythe with a blade at both ends of the shaft revolved as it mowed down the battleaxes of the charging Jaegers. Its overwhelming power easily sent their massive bodies flying.

Amid the blood storm, a shadow dancing in the darkness recited a verse: "Blood spilt on the ground can only be atoned for by the blood of the one who spilt it," said Abel. A pair of red eyes shone sadly. "Therefore, you must follow God's will. Amen!"

Even a Methuselah was no match for his speed. The instant Abel leapt, twirling the vicious blade, four severed heads flew up into the air, trailing streams of red. In mid-flight, his black clothes fluttering ominously, a flash of blue-white fire grazed the hem of Abel's robe. In the short time the Jaegers had bought, Radu-Dietrich had entered haste mode, shooting dividing fireballs into the air at rapid speed. The scythe revolved like a windmill, cutting, repelling, and pulverizing the fiery attacks one after the other.

While revolving his scythe, which looked like a ring of fire in front of his body, Abel shouted.

"This nonsense is pointless!" After he broke through a smokescreen, he pursued the Efreit, who had already switched to flight, with ferocious haste. After leaping a distance close to thirty feet, Abel quietly landed before Dietrich's eyes. "Surrender! Or else!" he yelled.

Although the scythe was swinging down before his eyes, the blue-haired young man didn't stop dashing. He charged on as though Abel weren't there.

"Sorry." The pitch-black blade that accompanied the sad voice struck Radu-Dietrich squarely in the heart. The blow severed his thorax and reached his spine, and sent his body hurtling backward. After Radu's body, its trunk half cut off, violently struck the floor with a sickening sound, it kept rolling sideways, but it eventually stopped moving when it hit the wall.

"Sin is eternal, so I must pray for the dead," said Abel. For the first time, a sigh leaked from his lips. The priest's expression was dark and hardened as he stared at the corpses lying on the floor, but now was no time to indulge in sentiment. Still looking depressed, Abel walked over to Baron of Luxor, who had died once again, and knelt by his side. He'd hardly known him while he was alive, but he'd heard the story from Ion. Although he was a man who'd betrayed his friend, was that enough of a sin that his body had to suffer defilement even after death?

"Please rest in peace, Baron," said Abel as he made the sign of the cross, in honor of the dead. Glancing down, he noticed the transparent cube peeking out of the corpse's pocket. It was *that thing's* restart file. What did the Orden intend to use that kind of thing for? The seal that had been placed by her order in the distant past was still alive. As long as that existed, data like this should be useless.

It was then that Abel heard a mocking voice in his ears. <Father, you mustn't steal that.>

At the same time, the memory cube he'd picked up was taken from him with abnormal strength.

"Wha?" At the sight of the person who stole back the memory cube, Abel's eyes opened so wide they nearly popped out. "That's insane! How can you move with that body?"

The dead man's pallid lips replied with a derisive voice. <Ahhh, you've done it, haven't you, Father?>

The Methuselah's corpse, which had just died a second time, pushed up the upper half of its body from the pool of blood. A bright red hole gaped in its torso, indicating that the flash of the scythe had cut Radu's chest in half. The blow had pulverized his heart, and must have reached his spine. After so much damage, even a corpse should've died. But the blue-haired young man stood up as if nothing had happened.

As he pushed the internal organs dangling from the wound back into his body, the one who'd been sliced in half spoke in a conversational tone. <This "Radu Barvon" has been specially tuned up.>

By the time his lips had turned up into a crescent moon shape, his wound had disappeared as if it were never there.

<This body now has endurance and battle strength greater than the Jaegers lying there. We also tried incorporating this kind of amusing device. >

'Abel's head was suddenly engulfed in blue-white flames. Radu's blood that had leaked onto the floor, and formed a bright red. pool, burned to nothingness. A pained cry emanated from the lips of Crusnik, as he received the heat of living napalm, which reached a few thousand degrees. Swiftly retreating, he tried to gain distance from the flames, but something inexplicable happened.

"What?" Abel gasped.

The flames moved like living things, and then charged at the priest. If he hadn't leapt and instinctively wielded the scythe, Abel's whole body would've become a fireball.

"Wh-what in the world is this?" asked Abel with a raspy groan.

The flames had literally stood up. Surrounding Radu-Dietrich, who was still laughing, were at least ten masses of fire in the human shapes of the legendary fire giants.

<Normally, an Efreet can only secrete napalm from the secretion glands in their palms. But *this* "Radu Barvon" has been given the ability to produce fire from the Hood flowing throughout his entire body. Using "strings," after ignition, I can control their movements to a certain degree with my will.>

The fire puppets moved, surrounding Abel, who was pinned against the wall.

<It's a shame, but the "strings" can't stand high temperatures, so there's a limit to the time I can move them. Still, it should be long enough to burn you to a cinder. >

Abel swung his scythe at the puppets of fire closing in on him. The wind that kicked up due to the force of the swing caused the figures to crumble momentarily; however, they regained their shape, and pressed in, trying to grab the priest. No matter how many times the scythe swung, it was impossible to fend off all the attacks. The -writhing flames banded together to form a whirlpool that caught Crusnik in its grip.

It was then that a sharp shout, followed by a red flash and countless bullets flew in, cutting down the blue flames. "Father!"

The Spear of Gei Borg orbited like lightning, obliterating the flames that were still trying to swallow Abel. The bullets created an unusual crater at the feet of the Efreet who was standing behind the firestorm.

"Are you all right, Father? Get away from him, Dietrich!" said Esther.

"Esther, be careful! He's no ordinary person!" warned Astharoshe.

The red-haired girl pulled the loading pump with a menacing noise, and re-aimed her shotgun at the blue-haired Methuselah.

<This is perfect. It looks as though some bait has arrived to make you serious, Abel Nightroad.>

Dietrich resembled a child who had found a new toy as fresh flames poured from his hands. This time, the flames that danced around him began to form a long, thin shape, like a snake or spear.

<Well, shall I start with the Marquise of Kiev first? Let's experiment and see if you can still wear a gentlemanly face when the lovely ladies have been burnt to ash.>

"S-stop!" said Abel.

As the group of flaming snakes had wound around Aste's body like an evil dragon that had found a sacrificial virgin, it raised its head toward her.

"Aste!" cried Abel.

But the fire snakes were attacking the Marquise of Kiev from all sides. Although she was a Methuselah, it was impossible to avoid the flames attacking at that speed. When they parted for an instant, she leapt.

"Wh-what is this?" asked Ashtaroshe. Even while flustered, she brandished the spear and struck down a few fire snakes, but she couldn't counter all of the attacks coming from all directions.' One of them dove past her red shield and caught the beautiful, white-haired woman from behind, sending her flying backward. Her mouth, opened in the shape of a scream, exhaled, as her body, which stunk like burnt meat, hit the floor.

"Marquise of Kiev!" Esther shouted. The girl ran over to Aste and tried her best to put out the fire, but the Marquise's body didn't react except by trembling faintly. Meanwhile, the fire snakes had regained their shapes and, discovering their next victim, assumed an attack posture once again.

"Esther, look out!" said Abel.

The fire snakes reared their heads over the nun as she desperately tried to put out the fire on Aste's back. As she looked overhead, Esther discovered a group of fires surrounding her. As one, they looked like a demon that had found a fresh sacrifice. A scream bellowed from her mouth. She was unable to escape the flames closing in.

Abel's face twisted with a certain determination. "It's unavoidable!" Glaring at the living flames, the priest appeared as though he'd made up his mind. He chanted the spell that would call forth the detestable creatures that dwelt within his body.

"Nanomachine Crusnik 02, eighty percent," said Abel.

But the calamitous spell never finished. With a sharp cry of pain, Abel's knees crumpled. After he collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut, he tugged painfully at his chest. His eyes, opened wide as if he'd seen something unbelievable, had already regained their blueness that resembled a winter lake.

"Damn! The Crusnik?" Abel exclaimed. The priest regarded his body with eyes that had lost their red light. The scythe in his hands melted like an icicle showered in sunlight, and his silver hair, which had been standing on end, withered as if it had lost its strength.

Crusnik was no longer there. Only one young man, Abel Nightroad, remained.

< Aren't you unsightly, Father. >

Dietrich chuckled as he gazed at Abel, who was panting with pain. Only prolonging the priest's agony, the fire snakes stopped moving, but they still surrounded Esther. One side of his face lit up by the flames, the demon mocked the fallen priest.

<"A vampire that sucks the blood of vampires." The source of your power is none other than the blood of vampires. The Bacillus Kudrak eats the red blood cells of humans, and you Crusniks prey on that bacillus. But you don't absorb that essential bacillus, the blood of vampires. No, you actually despise it. But doing so, you can't endure as well as *them*.>

"Wh-why?" asked Abel. The priest's voice was now startlingly thin as he weakly shielded his face from the blue-white flames with his raised arms. "How do you know that?"

<How do I know? It's a problem if you underestimate me. I know all kinds of other things. For example, that you are "the enemy of the world.">

Dietrich laughed evilly. An especially large fireball floated in his palm as he gazed gleefully at the priest, whose face was contorted in shock.

<This sort of thing is the Crusniks' disappointment. I wanted to buy a little more of you, but you seem to be sold out.>

It now seemed difficult for Abel, who'd gone completely pale, to stand up. After gloating over his enemy, still lying there powerlessly, Dietrich formed a new fireball in his fist.

< After I finish you off here, there will be people who will get angry, but who cares. Goodbye, Abel Nightroad.>

With a jeer, Dietrich hurled a napalm bomb about the size of a person's head. Its target as it flew with a roar was Abel's head, which was about to turn into charcoal.

"Won't you leave it at that, Orden boy?" asked Seth sarcastically.

The fireball aiming for Abel miraculously scattered in the air. After splitting apart in space, just as though it had struck an invisible wall, it turned into delicate fiery particles that rained down onto the floor.

Dietrich's expression warped with displeasure. <Who are you?>

"Me? I'm just a beautiful girl passing by," said Seth. The short girl, her long green clothes fluttering, grinned, but her eyes were flashing coldly beneath her black hair. Her white face, the shape of an inverted egg, resembled a China doll's face, and her mischievous expression was that of a little girl.

There was one more person whose expression froze when they spotted the girl. "Seth?" cried Abel.

"Hey, it's been a long time, Abel. Have you been well?" asked Seth. A soft light filled her eyes as she addressed the priest, but as they moved to the Efreet, they turned cold and hostile. "Now then, Orden boy, has it occurred to you to stop doing as you please in my castle?"

<'My castle'? So you're the Empress? Empress Vladika of the New Human Empire?> Dietrich's voice rattled with tension. That hadn't happened before, even when Abel changed into Crusnik. <Oh dear, it seems both Sulayman and I were absurd buffoons. So we've been dancing in your hand since the beginning? I suppose the Duchess of Moldova isn't dead, either?>

The girl Empress smiled back coldly at Dietrich's questions, which sounded as though he were gossiping. "I like considerate children, but that's enough playtime. All you have to do now is run back to *him* like a good boy with your tail between your legs, or else I'll deal with you here. Choose which you like."

As she spoke, the fire snakes had been closing in around the girl as if to intimidate her. Wickedly narrowing his eyes, which reflected the blue-white sparkle, Dietrich spoke in a voice dripping with hostility. <Today is an unlucky day. I'm really unlucky, meeting two monsters, of all things. Although, I do hate being ordered by other people enough to die.>

As if responding to their master's voice, the fire snakes began to gyrate in unison. This time they encircled the girl without leaving any gaps, and attacked with perfect timing.

"Seth!" Esther cried in vain. No one could cope with such timing and speed. If the blue flames fell upon the Empress, her body would evaporate.

"Nanomachine Crusnik 03, forty percent limited activation-Authorized," said Seth.

The low voice made the air shake and caused the flames trying to envelop the girl to change their direction.

What reflected in Dietrich's eyes, open wide in shock, were flames in midair that appeared as though they'd struck an invisible wall. There were also two ominous red points of light that occupied the flames' center. Just then, he realized that the sudden red flash that overpowered the flames was the flash from Seth's eyes.

"Dietrich, you can't defeat me," said Seth.

All of a sudden, a fierce gale erupted, causing the flames to reverse in direction and flow back toward their master Dietrich. Radu-Dietrich's body was engulfed in flames. If he hadn't installed artificial skin, with heat-resistant coating, over his whole body that had previously been burned by sunlight in Carthage, he would've surely turned to dust. The sight of him, still standing with his entire body wreathed in flames resembled a beast that had crawled out of Hell.

<Indeed, you are something. However, you're just like somebody else, in that your end game is naive. > Baring fangs from lips burnt to the point of disfigurement, Dietrich smiled brutally.

The memory cube he'd worked so hard to get his hands on had been lost in the flames. There was no reason to forcibly recover this puppet. If he had to dispose of it here —

<I might as well just take Her Majesty the Empress's life, because it would be rather silly if only my puppet were destroyed. >

By the time he spat that out, Dietrich's body had entered haste mode. He took the limiter completely off and abnormally stimulated his nervous system in excess of normal haste mode. Not caring that his flesh, unable to withstand the friction, burned off, he leapt toward the woman with red eyes.

"My end game is naive? Aren't you confusing me with somebody? I'm not as much of a people-lover as he is," said Seth.

Dietrich closed in, the embodiment of a gale of death. It was then that Seth, still smiling, raised both arms with a screech. Thick black flashes spilled forth. At first glance, it looked like heavy oil; but after it collected in Seth's hands, it hardened into a metallic form. As the Empress unfurled her arms, she revealed two very long tuning forks, each about the length of a sword, grasped in each hand.

"I warned you to run, Puppeteer," said Seth.

All of a sudden, Dietrich's charging body rebounded backward as if repelled by an invisible wall. *Is this the same shield that turned back the napalm flames before?* he thought to himself. Upon striking the wall, Dietrich was able to wrench his body like a cat and absorb the shock. He tried to stand up again afterward, but collapsed on the spot like a puppet with its strings cut.

Radu-Dietrich looked down at his completely unresponsive legs, opening his eyes wide. *Was the damage greater than I thought?* He'd turned white from the knees down, but it wasn't only a matter of blood loss. The skin that had turned to ash, the flesh, the bones, were all crumbling apart! The strange phenomenon didn't stop at his legs. Smoke rose from every part of his body. Despite there being no sign of fire, his whole body was being cooked.

<My body's burning. What is happening? >

The Empress standing directly in front of Dietrich answered him, as he moaned in shock.

"That is called high-energy, focused-formula supersonic waves — flames of sound." The two tuning forks in her hands continued vibrating at such a high speed that humans couldn't sense it. "By bundling the powerful supersonic wave beam with a uniform wavelength at an arbitrary point, it burns solely what it's aimed at. It even burns the point a laser would pass through, but this supersonic wave beam has no effect whatsoever until it's bundled. However, once I got serious . . ."

The Empress's eyes sparkled with murderous intent as the blue-haired corpse bent backward like a bow. Just like Lot's wife depicted in the Bible, and just like the stupid woman who disobeyed God's advice and turned around to the ruined city of Sodom, his body was changing into a pillar of pure white salt. The dead Efreet's body was rapidly beginning to collapse.

"Listen, Puppeteer. I'll let you off with this much today. However . . ." Seth's voice gave off a chill like fallen frost as she gazed at his face, twisted in horror. "... when next we meet, I absolutely won't forgive you. So run from here as fast as you can. Run and run and run. Then I will hunt you down wherever you are, catch you, and do something hideous. Radu, Sulayman, Ion— what you have done to my children is irrevocable. I will absolutely take revenge."

The moment Seth's lovely lips completed the threatening speech, Radu-Dietrich's body turned to pure white ash and scattered.

"Father!" said Esther. Right after the pillar of salt crumbled, the red-haired nun ran over to Abel. Clinging to his tall body, which had collapsed from horrible burns, Esther shook him earnestly. "Father! Father! Father! Hang on!"

"Hey Esther," said Abel. Revealing a weak smile, Abel softly put his hand to Esther's sooty face. The touch of cool skin felt good. "I'm fine. What about you, are you okay?"

"Y-yes," Esther replied, nodding almost mechanically. She anxiously reached a hand toward Abel's burns. "Terrible burns. Father, you need first aid at once."

"He'll be fine, Esther," Seth assured her.

When Esther glanced up, the girl in the Empress's clothes was looking down at the two of them, her jade green eyes twinkling. "I'm sorry, but could you move away a bit? I want to talk with him a little," said Seth.

A rather wary look crossed Esther's face. "Yes, but . . ." She stretched her small body to shield Abel from the Empress's gaze, but it was Abel who reassured the nun. "I'm fine, Esther. You please look after Aste. I think she'll recover from her wound, but just in case..."

"Understood," said Esther as she reluctantly left Abel's side. She hurried toward the fallen Aste, looking back-ward the entire way.

Seth smiled as she watched her go. "She's a good girl, that one." Any trace of hostility disappeared from her eyes as she looked down meaningfully at Abel's face. "Doesn't she resemble *her* a bit? Not in her face, but somewhere in her spirit."

"It's really you, Seth?" asked Abel quietly. "The Empress who ruled for eight hundred years. I didn't think it could be anyone but you."

"Should I believe that you deliberately came this far because you knew that and wanted to see my face after so long?" asked Seth. She knelt by the wounded young man's side, gently touching his cheek with concerned eyes. "When did we last meet? You seem to be living as bitter a lifestyle as always. I hurt just looking at you."

Abel tried to smile faintly, but he couldn't utter any words in response. As he tried to stand up, his face grimaced in severe pain.

Gently taking his hand and helping him up, the Empress said the young man's name longingly. "It's been nine hundred years, Abel, big brother."

The Envoy's Return

– *The LORD watch between me and the when we are absent one from another.*
– Genesis 31:49

I

Concerning the actions of Sulayman and the hard-liners, the truth is, we'd been suspicious for a long time. However, we couldn't catch them in the act, so we tried setting a trap," said Mirka. The girl with her long golden hair fixed in a ponytail carefully lifted a cup before her mouth. With a giddy face, she sipped at her favorite hot chocolate.

She appeared to be about the same age as Ion. Looking at her innocent face, nobody would have guessed that she was actually the Chief Privy Counselor of the New Human Empire, a noble among nobles, lord among lords, Mirka Fortuna, Duchess of Moldova.

"If they were going to move, they would've done so upon your return home. So we spread a net in the Empire, and waited for you to come home. The rest, you already know," said Mirka.

Nodding, as if drawn into the story, Ion nearly forgot himself. "Indeed, but, Grandmother, you used me, your own grandson as bait?" asked Ion. He glared at his grandmother sitting demurely on the sofa, next to a window that overlooked the sea, and raised his voice in protest. "So, you devised the whole thing from the beginning with the intention of involving me?"

"Didn't I tell you so? When did my grandson get so stupid? Ion, you can't be dissatisfied with the social ramifications of being my grandson. Or are you trying to say you're dissatisfied with the plan your grandmother devised?" asked Mirka. Her tone wasn't particularly critical. Rather, Mirka looked as though she was perfectly calm. However, Ion's face visibly blanched.

"D-dissatisfied? N-no, that's . . . I'm never dissatisfied, but — "

"Oh, that's a pity. If you'd voiced even one complaint, I could've teased you as much as I liked," said Mirka.

Staring disappointedly at her grandson, who bowed his head low, dripping cold sweat, Mirka smirked. In appearance, rather than the greatest lord in the Empire who joined in secret deliberations, she looked like a malicious older sister who enjoyed tormenting her little brother.

There were people watching the heartwarming conversation between grandmother and grandson from a corner of the room.

"Didn't Her Excellency the Duchess say she didn't intend to tease Count of Memphis like that?" asked Astharoshe.

"Yes. If Lady Mirka were serious, it wouldn't end with this kind of thing," said Baybars.

Aste and Baybars sat together, having been summoned to the Duchess's mansion, and exchanged quiet conversation.

"Until the incident is settled, give Count of Memphis a good teasing," the large, dark-skinned man, who had finally been released from that wicked order, added. "When done by Lady Mirka, it's no more than an expression of love. But, after all, even we Palace Guards, whose bravery is lauded, are afraid to be summoned to the Chief Privy Counselor for a message. If you ever argue with her, Marquise of Kiev, I think you'd better have your affairs in order first."

"Lord Baybars," said Mirka.

Baybars' face froze at the girl's sarcastic voice. Mirka herself had snuck over to them before he noticed. She smiled at his face, which looked as though he'd been sentenced to death.

"The work of you and your Palace Guards this time was truly great. Her Majesty was also extraordinarily happy," said Mirka.

"It's a great honor!" said Baybars. The black giant was as stiff as if a drawn sword had been placed at his neck, and cold sweat appeared on his cheeks.

"In order to repay your service, I've requested that from now on, I want to stop having the Palace Guards people come to me to take messages. Because I'd be sorry to use people *who hate me so much*, " said Mirka coyly, putting her hand to her mouth. "Hereafter, I will use only you, Lord Baybars, as my messenger. Ha! Now we can see each other every day. Oh dear, I'm just happy that you're so happy." The Chief Privy Counselor laughed with a bell-like voice.

Looking on, Ion and Aste glanced at each other and sighed.

Just then, a girl peeked in from the doorway. "Um, excuse me, I've finished packing," said Esther. The girl, wearing a neat citizen's uniform, hefted the bag filled with her personal possessions, bowing her head deeply to the four people. "Thank you for taking care of me. I have to go soon."

"A-are you going already, Esther?" asked Ion. Ignoring his grandmother's thoughtful look, Ion kicked his chair and stood up. He'd been certain that the boat leaving the Imperial capital with Esther and one more person aboard would depart at sunset. "There's still a little time. Shouldn't you relax a bit longer?"

"But Father Nightroad is already waiting at the boat, so I thought I'd go a little early," said Esther. She smiled sweetly, her red hair fluttering. Except for the new bandage still wrapped around her shoulder, there was no trace of the disturbance in the Celestial Imperial Palace. After a week's rest, the Terran girl had completely recovered. "Thank you for everything, forever, Your Excellency."

"Y-yes," said Ion, clumsily nodding back at the overly formal thanks. / *knew this time would come a week ago — no, even before then*. Ion had prepared a number of clever goodbyes over the course of the entire week. But when the time came, the carefully prepared words of parting wouldn't come out of his mouth. "U-um, Esther?"

"Yes?" Esther looked back strangely at Ion, whose words were stuck in his throat, and whose face had turned alternately pale and red. Outside the window, a sailboat with its sails already spread was swaying on the waves beyond the pier. A tall, silver-haired man was standing next to the boat, gazing up at the southern sky. The man's shadow lay blackly on the deck, under the sparkle of eternal twilight. "Well, I'm going."

Esther smiled sadly at the boy who was still standing there, lost for words. "Take care, Your Excellency."

"Y-yeah," said Ion. By the time he turned around, Esther was already beginning to walk, her right shoulder slightly lower, because the wound she'd gotten shielding Ion hadn't fully healed.

The boy's hand reached for her back, but stopped short. As if grasping the air, as if blocked by an invisible wall, he didn't move. *No matter what I say here, no matter what kind of words we exchange, in the end, it's all fleeting*, he thought to himself.

Methuselah and Terran—the difference between the two races was absolute. He was an Imperial noble, and she was a nun in the Vatican, their bitter enemy. Wasn't it impossible to bridge such a gap? *It's best to part silently like this*

A slender hand touched Ion's shoulder as he watched the girl's shadow grow distant. When he glanced up, cold, beautiful features and amber eyes were gazing down at him from beneath white hair. "If there's something you want to say, you'd better say it, Count of Memphis," said Astharoshe. "They age too quickly. Age, and die. There's no guarantee you'll meet again."

"But . . ." Ion shook his head, looking as though he'd swallowed poison. What could he say to her now, when it was too late? What, to a girl he might not ever see again?

"You should say what you're thinking, Count," Astharoshe urged. Usually apathetic, this time, her eyes reflected the boy's face with the kindness of an older sister encouraging a younger brother. "You should say what you want to tell her. Am I wrong?"

The boy suddenly looked up. Nodding to the amber eyes as if he'd gotten over something, he dashed out of the room without looking back. The shadow he aimed for had already disappeared beyond the corridor. She was already opening the entry door, about to go outside. "Esther!" Ion yelled. "We'll meet again, Esther. Again, sometime! Without fail!"

She turned around, and beneath her red hair, a wide smile appeared upon her pale face.

"The air is clear here," said Abel.

The sky that promised eternal twilight sparkled with the colors of blood and gold. The "second moon" floated in the sky. It was rare for it to move from the corner of the southern sky. It resembled the eye of an evil god peering down to Earth, but it made the hearts of those who witnessed it swell.

There was no sign of fear in the man who gazed up at that fantastic satellite. Far from it, eyes the color of a winter lake reflected its light. There was even a hint of nostalgia in them. Meanwhile, a short girl sitting next to the priest on the side of the boat answered the young man's mutter. Her mussed black hair waved in the salt breeze. "Say, Abel, won't you stay here?" asked Seth. "It will make it easier for me to do things if you'll stay here, big brother. When something like this happens, I'm lonely by myself. Can't we get along as brother and sister like we did a long time ago? I have a lot of friends here. Why don't we all live together as friends?"

Seth didn't sound as if she were joking. Rather, her voice sounded serious, as if sympathizing with her companion. But the man's expression didn't change, as if rejecting all help.

"I'm a sinner," said Abel. His gaze still turned on Heaven, as if it were counting his sins, Abel rejected the girl's proposal. "I shouldn't have that right."

"How many years do you think it's been since then, Abel?" Seth asked. An irritated tone colored her voice. After striking the ship's side with her small hand, she shook her head and shouted, "Nine hundred years. Nine hundred years! Isn't it enough? You've paid plenty for your sins. *She* would surely forgive you, too. Nobody's blaming you!"

"I won't forgive myself," said Abel. Under the firmament's light, the ocean's surface sparkled like a golden mirror. But Abel's eyes were as gloomy as if he'd gathered up all the darkness in the world. "Even if somebody in this world forgives me, even if all of the hands in the world are offered to me, I won't forgive myself."

Those were the eyes of a man who absolutely refused to save himself. Gazing at his profile, Seth sighed deeply. Her lips trembled regretfully, and before long, her shoulders slumped. "Really, you obstinate — " Just as she was beginning to look absolutely disgusted, a glimmer of hope returned to her face. Standing up, Seth nodded hard as if to convince herself. "Well, that's fine, too. If you're there, it will also be convenient. I won't force you to stay."

"Convenient?" asked Abel. Looking at the girl's face for the first time, he voiced his doubts cautiously. "Is there something convenient for you about me being there, Seth?"

"*He's* still alive. I confirmed it with my own eyes, a year ago," said Seth.

When she said "he," a look of loathing and fear appeared on Seth's face. It was an expression that only one who had seen something truly vile could make. Yet, compared to the expression that clouded Abel's face, it was mild.

"He ... is still *alive*?" asked Abel. His voice was hoarse, but Seth heard it clearly. However, something submerged in it, resembling madness, was now threatening to burst. "01 is still alive?"

"Yes, and he looks exactly as he did then," said Seth, her voice quaking. The girl who had reigned over the Methuselahs as the Empress of the New Human Empire for more than eight hundred years was now certainly afraid of something. "Didn't he likely regenerate, using his container, after a few hundred years? Neither you nor I could do it, but he could, if he conspired with *them*. *We* were naive. At any rate, *they're* not of this world.

Whispering as if talking to herself, Seth glanced up. From beyond the pier, a few human figures were walking toward them: a red-headed girl and a short boy walking side by side; and a short distance from them, an assortment of a tall, beautiful woman, a black giant, and a girl with golden hair.

Lit by eternal twilight, Seth regarded Abel, who was by her side, staring at the same thing. Soon it would be sunset, time to leave port. The moment of separation was nearing. How long would it be until they met again? After a hundred years? Or after two thousand?

"Well, big brother, what will you do now?" asked Seth, her black hair blowing in the sea breeze. "After you go back home, what will you do?"

"Destroy him," Abel replied.